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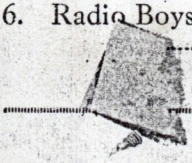

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or,

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J. W. DUFFIELD

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CHICAGO NEW YORK

THE
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RADIO BOYS UNDER THE SEA; or, The Hunt for Sunken Treasure.

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CHAPTER I

A Daring Hold-Up

"Hands up! Quick!"

The command, barked out in sharp, staccatto tones, was emphasized by the ugly muzzle of a revolver thrust through the window of the paying teller.

It was a bright Spring morning in the town of Castleton, a thriving city of some ten thousand population, located in a prosperous section of the Middle West. As it was Saturday, there was a little more stir and animation in the streets than usual, for it was the day on which farmers and their wives of the rural district served by the town drove in to do their shopping. Already, though it was no more than eleven o'clock, there was a fair sprinkling of cars and buggies standing in the open square in front of the court house, and the number was constantly being augmented by new arrivals.

In the Castleton Bank, the only one that the little town boasted, there was unusual activity, for the cashier and his two clerks

were busy making up the money for the pay-rolls of the three mills on which the commercial prosperity of the town largely depended.

A large touring car, whose every line denoted speed, came rapidly up the street and stopped at the door of the bank. The man at the wheel kept his seat, without shutting off the engine, while four men climbed out. One took his stand at the side of the machine, and the other three quickly ascended the steps of the bank.

There were four customers in the bank at the time. One, a woman, was having a check cashed, two men were depositing cash and checks with the receiving teller, while a fourth man was at a desk making out a slip.

The man who appeared to be the leader of the newcomers and whose face was marred by an ugly scar on his right cheek went straight to the window of the paying teller, roughly thrust aside the woman standing there and pointing his revolver at the teller ordered him to hold up his hands.

At the same instant his companions drew their weapons and herded the four customers up against the wall, where they held them at the muzzles of their revolvers.

The startled teller stood for a second as though paralyzed, and then slowly obeyed.

A second rough command brought similar action on the part of the receiving teller. Then the bandit vaulted over the low railing, and still holding his revolver ready for action, began to thrust great bundles of bills into the capacious pockets of the ulster that he wore.

Just then the cashier of the bank, Mr. Weston, stepped out of the door of his inner office. He took in the situation at a glance, darted back, snatched a revolver from his desk and reappearing in the doorway fired at the robber but missed him. At the same instant the bandit's revolver cracked and the cashier fell with a bullet in his shoulder.

With a muttered imprecation at the necessity for the shooting, which made him hurry his movements, the robber gathered in the rest of the packages of bills in sight, jumped over the railing and rushed for the door accompanied by his confederates.

The sound of the shot had attracted attention outside and men were already hurrying toward the bank. The robber at the curb fired several shots and halted them for an instant. That moment of grace was sufficient to permit the miscreants to leap into the car, which started up instantly and sped down the street in a cloud of dust.

Three young men came around a corner as the car whirled by. They were laughing

and jesting, and evidently on good terms with themselves and the world.

"Look at that car," exclaimed Phil Strong, a stalwart, vigorous young fellow, slightly taller than his companions. "It's going like a blue streak."

"Smashing the speed law into bits," agreed Dick Weston. "I guess that—Hello!" he cried, as he saw the commotion and heard the shouting in front of the bank. "What's up?"

They broke into a run and in a moment were in the midst of the excited crowd. Another moment sufficed to learn of what had happened. They rushed into the bank, Dick frantic with grief and apprehension at the news that his father had been shot. A doctor who happened to be in the crowd was already ministering to the wounded man.

"Only a flesh wound," the doctor assured Dick, bringing him an immense relief.

"Don't mind me, Dick," said Mr. Weston, trying to summon up a reassuring smile. "It's the bank I'm thinking of. It'll be seriously hurt if those scoundrels get away with all that cash. Get after them as fast as you can. Every minute counts."

Dick was loth to obey, but Phil, standing beside him, put his hand on his arm.

"Your father's right, Dick," he said. "He's getting good attention here, and you can't

serve him better than by trying to run down the thieves. Come with me and come quick. I've got a plan."

They hurried out of the bank, pushing their way through the constantly increasing crowd that congested the doors. In the street, men were piling into cars and starting out in the direction that the robbers had taken.

"It's well meant but of no use," said Phil, pointing to the cars. "They haven't a Chinaman's chance to catch up with them this side of kingdom come. The robbers' car can run rings around any of these. But I know something that's faster than any car."

"The airplane," exclaimed Dick, a light breaking in on him.

"Right you are," replied Phil. "But that isn't all. There's something faster than the airplane."

"Radio," cried Tom Hadley.

"Now you've hit it," approved Phil, relaxing for a moment the speed at which all three had been racing down the street. "Now, fellows, here's the dope. Tom, you run to my house and get busy with the radio. Call up every town within a radius of fifty miles. Tell the police of the robbery and describe as well as you can the kind of car that the men are escaping in. Don't forget the scar

on the face of the leader. Hustle now, old scout. Dick and I will get out the airplane."

Tom was off like a shot.

"Now Dick," said Phil, taking the lead, as he always did in a crisis that demanded quick thinking and swift action, "it's us for the airplane. Lucky, isn't it that you and I spent almost all of last week in getting the 'Arrow' into shape? She's in splendid condition and fit to fly for a man's life. It will be strange if we don't give those thieves a run for their money—or rather for the bank's money."

In a few minutes they had reached the hangar in which their airplane was stored, at a flying field on the outskirts of the town.

They unlocked and flung open the door and wheeled out the machine, a biplane of the latest make and one with whose operation both of them were thoroughly familiar.

They wheeled her out into the open, made one last hasty examination to make assurance doubly sure and climbed into the fuselage. Phil gave her the gas and the machine after a short run made a perfect takeoff from the grassy field and soared into the air like a bird. Phil turned her in the direction, as nearly as he could guess, that the robbers had gone, and she clove the air with the speed of the arrow after which she was named.

The roar of the motor made it difficult

to carry on much conversation, but Phil's brain was working hard. He figured out that the robbers would not continue far in the direction that they had taken at the start, since that would be too obvious and easy for their pursuers to follow. At some point of the road they would turn at right angles, or possibly double on their tracks, in the attempt to bewilder their would be captors.

The only way in which Phil and Dick could circumvent such strategy was to describe a wide curve that would take in not only the road ahead of them, but a large extent of the cross roads to the right and left. This disadvantage however was counterbalanced to some extent by the lofty position of the plane, that permitted the landscape to be seen for many miles in every direction. They had also a splendid pair of field glasses, which Dick kept glued to his eyes while Phil drove the plane.

The superb condition of the plane also favored them. The engine never missed a stroke, but ran with the steady hum that is music to the ears of the aviator. Encouraged by the way the Arrow was working, Phil let her out until she was traveling at the rate of nearly ninety miles an hour. At this rate it seemed inevitable that they would soon sight their quarry, despite the start that had

given the latter the advantage.

The roads beneath were dotted with cars coming and going, and two or three of them seemed so like the robbers' car that Phil swooped down near enough to establish that they were not the one he had in view.

After several such disappointments, Dick suddenly straightened up with a sharp exclamation.

"Spotted them this time," he cried. "It's dollars to doughnuts that's the car. Same shape, same color and it's going like all possessed."

He passed the glasses to Phil, who turned them in the direction that Dick indicated. There, sure enough, on a road to the right, was a machine that answered the description they had hastily been able to gather of the car in which the bandits had made their getaway. It was going like the wind.

"There's another car about half a mile behind it," Phil remarked after a moment's keen scrutiny. "The top's down and I can see that it's full of men in uniform."

"Good old Tom!" exclaimed Dick jubilantly. "He's got busy with the radio all right, and that second car's chasing the first one. Do you think it can catch up?"

Phil studied the situation for a full minute before replying.

"Not a chance," he answered finally, handing back the glasses. "The first car is steadily increasing the distance between the two. But here's where we get busy."

He turned the plane in the direction pursued by the flying cars.

"What's your plan?" asked Dick.

"You'll see in a minute," muttered Phil, all his attention centered on the chase.

CHAPTER II

Skillful Strategy

Both of the racing cars kept on at full speed, but a steadily widening gap showed between them as the first continued to draw away from its pursuer.

Soon the Arrow was directly above the second of the two cars. Phil kept moving steadily earthward and was now flying at a height of about two hundred feet. It was plainly to be seen that Phil's supposition had been correct, for the car held half a dozen policemen heavily armed. It seemed probable too, that Tom in his radio message had told the police of the starting out of the airplane, for the officers seemed to realize that they had an ally in the plane and gesticulated vigorously, shouting and pointing to the road ahead.

Phil waved one hand at them, as a signal that he understood, and darted ahead until he had overtaken the fleeing car. The top of this was up, so that at first the robbers

did not see the plane. But they heard the roaring of the motor, and first one head and then another was thrust out at the side of the machine looking upward. At first they did not seem especially alarmed, thinking probably that it was out on a practice flight and just happened to be in their vicinity. But as it continued to keep pace with them and in the same direction, suspicion seized them, and the car leaped frantically forward as the last ounce of speed was extracted from its motor.

Phil's eyes kept scanning the landscape ahead and at last saw the chance for which he was looking. About a mile in advance was a level field with no bars between it and the road. He quickened speed, swooped down in a graceful curve, landed in the field with scarcely a jar and at just the spot where the wheels under the momentum of the flight carried the plane into the middle of the road blocking it completely.

Quick as a flash the Radio Boys clambered out on the further side of the plane.

"Guess that will stop them," exclaimed Phil triumphantly.

"It sure will," agreed Dick admiringly, "but at the same time it will smash the plane."

"If it does, it will have to," replied Phil.

"But I don't think they'll drive into it. They'd wreck their own car or overturn it or at any rate get all tangled up in the gear of the plane. They'll stop all right. The police car is less than a minute behind them, and I figure it will be right on top of the bandits before they get over their confusion. We'll soon know, for here they come."

Around a curve in the road three hundred yards away came the robbers' car and bore straight down on the plane which seemed doomed to destruction.

And while Phil and Dick stand there with every pulse athrill waiting for the outcome, it may be well for the benefit of those who have not read the preceding volume of this series to tell who the Radio Boys were and what had been their fortunes and adventures up to the time this story opens.

Phil Strong had been born and brought up in the town of Castleton, where his father was a physician with a large practice. From his early years, Phil had been a natural leader among the boys of his own age, and had been foremost in the athletic sports that appeal to all healthy, red-blooded boys. He had been the crack pitcher of his school nine and a speedy full back on the school eleven. His freedom from conceit or meanness of any kind had made him exceedingly popular. His

brain was keen and worked quickly, and he was seldom at a loss in extricating himself from any trying situation into which chance might have brought him. He never looked for trouble, but he never sidestepped it when it came, and his coolness and courage made him a valuable friend and a formidable enemy. At the time the incidents here narrated took place, he was eighteen years old, tall, athletic, of fair complexion, with keen blue eyes and brown hair. He had a sister, Phyllis, a pretty girl of sixteen.

His special chum among the Castleton boys was Dick Weston, who, as we have seen, was the son of the cashier of the Castleton bank. Dick was about the same age as Phil, but differed from him in appearance, having brown eyes and swarthy complexion. The two had been friends since their earliest recollections and were almost inseparable. Where one of them was found the other was quite sure not to be far away. Dick lacked the initiative of Phil, but was always ready to follow where the latter led. Where Phil was captain, Dick made an admirable first mate, backing Phil up to the limit and standing by him through thick and thin. He had two brothers, Harry, fifteen, and Joe, thirteen years of age.

Closely linked in friendship with Dick and

Phil were Steve Elwood and Tom Hadley, who had become acquainted with them through a curious combination of circumstances told in the first book of this series.

Steve Elwood was the son of a prosperous business man living in New York. He was a fine upstanding fellow, generous in the extreme, but hot tempered and impulsive and ready to fight at the drop of a hat. He had a stubby nose, freckled face and red hair, which explained perhaps the fiery disposition that usually goes with that kind of head covering. Phil's coolness had more than once got Steve out of scrapes into which his headlong nature had carried him.

Tom Hadley was of another type, good natured, jolly, always ready for a joke or a laugh, and perfectly certain that the world was a good place to live in. His father was an electrical engineer of Chicago. Tom had a firm idea that Chicago was the only town on earth, and as Steve had a similar idea about New York, there were many wordy arguments between the two that afforded immense enjoyment to Phil and Dick, who took an impish delight in egging them on when there was a lull in the battle.

At the time this story opens, Steve was in Texas, while Tom had dropped in on a visit to Phil and Dick in Castleton.

What perils and adventures the four friends had faced in common; how many times they had been within a hairsbreadth of death; how they had served their government in tracking and delivering up to justice a band of cunning and desperate criminals is fully told in the first book of this series, entitled: "Radio Boys In the Secret Service; Or, Running Down the Counterfeiters."

Now Phil and Dick were facing a peril of another kind, of which no one could predict the result. They had no weapons with them, and they knew that the bandits in the onrushing automobile were desperate criminals and would not hesitate a second in takingg life if that would aid their escape. But they had known this when they took the chance, and although their hearts beat furiously, they awaited the result without flinching.

For the first hundred yards the car came on with unabated speed. Then it perceptibly slackened, while the inmates could be seen with their heads together in an excited colloquy. The man in the seat beside the driver leaned far out and mentioned furiously to the boys to wheel the plane out of the road. As they stood motionless, he shook his clenched fist at them and shouted out an order to the men behind him.

The next instant a fusillade of shots came whistling over the heads of the boys, who, divining the nature of the command, had thrown themselves flat on the ground. One of the wings of the plane was clipped by a bullet but no other damage was done by the volley.

Again the car leaped forward as though the bandits had determined to take a desperate chance and plough their way through the plane. But when they were a hundred feet away, the driver seemed to lose heart and slowed down.

With a furious exclamation, the man sitting beside him struck the driver and grasped the wheel from him. In the mixup the front wheels of the car slewed violently to one side, and the car ran into a deep ditch at the side of the road where it overturned.

There was a tumult of shouts and oaths as the car went over, and at the same moment the police car came in sight around the turn. Its occupants were quick to grasp the situation, and the boys could see them rising in their seats with their weapons in their hands ready to leap.

Out from the overturned car the bandits came swarming like so many bees. An instant's glance told them of the trap into which they had fallen. Before them was the plane behind which were at least two men,

whether armed or not they could not tell. Behind them were half a dozen officers of the law, fully armed, who were already jumping from their seats and running toward them.

Their only chance lay in reaching a patch of woodland that lay a little ways back of the road. Once in its shadows some of them at least might stand a chance of eluding their pursuers.

At a command from their leader, the bandits fired a volley at the officers and then turned and ran toward the woods. A fusillade from the police revolvers followed them, and one of the robbers was shot in the foot and fell. The rest kept on, the fear of capture lending wings to their feet, and three of them reached the woods. One however, was headed off and ran into the open field where the plane had made its landing. He was fleeter than the two heavily built men who were pursuing him, and would have easily outdistanced them had not Phil taken a hand in the game.

Like a panther he was on the trail of the fugitive. The latter turned and saw him coming and redoubled his speed. There was no shaking Phil off however, and he gained rapidly. The man turned and fired at him but the bullet whizzed by harmlessly. The next instant Phil had launched himself on

him and the two went to the ground together.

The fall had knocked all the breath out of the robber, and there was little fight left in him. Phil wrenched the revolver out of his grasp, and as Dick came up just then, they bound the robber's arms together with Dick's belt, rendering him powerless. Then they helped him to his feet and marching behind him with an occasional prod of the pistol butt in his back when he showed an inclination to balk they came to the police car, in which the wounded robber had already been placed.

"Two of them anyway," remarked the officer in charge. "That was mighty quick and plucky work on your part, young fellow. He was getting away surely when you put out after him."

"Do you think there's any chance of nabbing the rest of them?" inquired Phil.

The officer shook his head dubiously.

"If we could have winged them before they got to the woods as we did this fellow," he said, indicating the wounded thief, "it would have been all right, but once in those thick woods it's an easy thing to lose sight of them. You can hear that there isn't much shooting going on just now. That means that our fellows can't find any targets to shoot at."

His prediction was verified when half an hour later his comrades came straggling back without additional prisoners.

"Don't believe they'll get far though," the chief comforted himself. "They're on foot and their description has been sent broadcast by radio, so that at this minute there are at least a thousand people looking for them. Every road in this county will be patrolled night and day and their chances of getting away are mighty slim."

The boys were not at all so sure of this, but they repressed their doubts.

"How about the stolen money?" asked Dick eagerly. "Have you recovered any of that?"

"Quite a heap I imagine," answered the chief, lifting up the seat of the car and displaying several large packages of bills. "Of course I don't know just how much the thieves grabbed, and I guess the bank don't know yet either. These were found in the car that turned over. Probably they dropped out of the leader's pockets in the mixup. We'll make another search of the car before we leave, but I guess we've got all that was there."

The search was made but yielded no further results. "I'll have to take charge of this money and turn it over to the authorities in

Castleton," remarked the chief, "but just for my own protection I'd like to have you boys count it now before us all, so that there can't be any question of the amount."

The Radio Boys did this willingly, and were relieved to find that the total footed up to a trifle over ten thousand dollars.

"That's a lot of money," said Phil hopefully. "Maybe that's all they were able to grab."

Here there was a snicker from one of the captured thieves.

The chief whirled about like a flash.

"What are you laughing at?" he demanded angrily.

CHAPTER III

In Big Figures

The man glared at him sullenly.

"Aw nuttin' ", he snarled. "Can't a guy even laugh widout you bulls buttin' in?"

"Don't get gay now," warned the chief. "It'll be easier for you to tell me now than it will when I get you alone with me in the police station."

This covert hint of a "third degree" was not wholly lost on the thief, who mulled it over in his mind.

"Come across now," prodded the chief, seeing that he was wavering.

"Well, it's dis way," the fellow answered. "It hit me funny when dis young bloke spoke of me boss bein' satisfied wid ten grands. Dat wouldn't be chicken feed fur him. He ain't no piker."

"What does he mean by 'grands' "? Dick asked of the chief.

"A 'grand' is the underworld slang for a thousand dollars," explained the chief. "What this rascal is trying to say is that his leader

only goes out after big thefts and would regard ten thousand dollars as a small haul. How much did he get away with then?" he asked of his captive.

But the robber had already concluded that he had talked too much, and no amount of threat or persuasion was able to get any more out of him.

"Well," said the chief at last, "I guess there's nothing more to be got out of this bird and we'd better be moving. I suppose you boys will be going back in your plane. Lucky you've got one to go back with," he added with a grin. "If that driver had kept his nerve, he'd have smashed the machine into flinders. It was a mighty fine and plucky risk for you to take, and it was the only thing that prevented the whole crowd from getting away. You'll get full credit for this when I turn in my report."

"We're not especially keen for credit, but we sure are glad to have got back some of the bank's cash," returned Phil with a smile. "We'll climb into the old bus and hustle back to Castleton to tell the folks you're coming."

"We won't be any further behind you than we can help," replied the chief, "and while you're about it give the sheriff a quiet tip to be ready to help us hustle these fellows into the jail, in case the crowd gets obstrep-

erous. They'll be feeling mighty ugly, I shouldn't wonder, for the town thinks a lot of Mr. Weston and this hold up is the rawest stuff that's been pulled off in this section for a long time."

"All right," said Phil, as in company with Dick he climbed to his seat in the airplane, and adjusted his hood, gloves and goggles.

The officers helped turn the plane around so that they could get a fair takeoff from the field, and after a short run the Arrow rose in the air with a whiz and a whirr and pointed her nose toward Castleton.

The Radio Boys were elated and jubilant at the success that had crowned their exploit. The only "fly in the ointment" was the uncertainty as to how much cash the robbers had gotten away with. Naturally, too, they felt regret that the whole band had not been captured. But all in all it had been a pretty good morning's work, and their hearts beat high with satisfaction. The hum of the motor seemed more musical than ever as the plane sped over hill and dale and river toward its destination.

Soon they came in sight of the old familiar landmarks and began to lay their course for the flying field. They were surprised as they neared it to see that a great crowd had gathered there.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Dick as they swept down to make their landing. "It looks as though the whole town has turned out and then some. The place is black with people."

"Sure thing," agreed Phil in surprise. "What's the big idea, I wonder."

"It's radio getting in its fine work, declared Dick. "The chief has radioed from the first town he came to, and Tom has caught the message and spread the news. See if I'm not a good guesser."

Because of the crowd, Phil had to figure carefully about making his landing, but the throng made a lane for him and the Arrow came down as light as thistledown. Her short run had barely ended before the crowd surged around the Radio Boys, cheering and shouting and almost pulling them out of the plane in their enthusiasm.

"Have a heart," protested Phil laughingly, as they mauled and pounded him and his companion. "Don't wring my hands off. I need them in my business."

Tom was among the first to greet them, his rotund face beaming with smiles.

"Bully boys!" he cried. "You turned the trick and the town's wild over you. Oh, I know all about it," he continued. "I got a radio from the chief and the whole town

knew it five minutes later."

"So you're the guilty wretch responsible for all this roughhousing," said Phil as he made a playful pass at him.

"I sure am," grinned Tom as he ducked, "and if you'd been ten minutes later I'd have had the town band here to meet you. I'll bet they're tuning up now."

In response to the questions showered upon them from all sides, the boys told of the morning's happenings, and this brought about a thinning of the crowd, who hurried off to the town hall to greet the police when they should arrive with their prisoners. This respite gave the boys a chance to get the Arrow into her hangar and then the trio hastened to Dick's home to find out how Mr. Weston was faring and to learn how great had been the loss sustained by the bank.

The wounded cashier had been taken to his home from the bank after having received first aid, and was now in bed under the physician's care. The bullet had been probed for and removed and the wound dressed. The family had the doctor's assurance that there was absolutely no fear of a fatal result, but at the moment the patient was suffering from shock and loss of blood and could see none but the immediate members of the family. Dick was permitted to see his father for a

moment, for it was felt that the news he brought of the recovery of part of the money at least would be of benefit to the sick man, but any further discussion of the matter was forbidden for the present.

After Phil and Tom had expressed their sympathy, they left the house, Dick having promised to rejoin them later, and made their way to the town hall, part of which was devoted to the purposes of a jail. Phil had barely time to hunt up the sheriff and give him the chief's message, before a roar on the outskirts of the crowd told of the approach of the police auto with the prisoners.

The car came in at rapid speed, and the crowd was forced to give way before it to prevent being run down. But as it slowed up before the town hall, there was an ominous closing in upon the machine, while a murmur ran through the crowd, quickly deepening into a roar.

"Hang them!"

"Lynch them!"

"Let us get at them!"

"Hand them over!"

Several jumped on the running board of the car, but were pushed back by the police, who had drawn their clubs and now stood guard over their cowering prisoners. A determined leader just then would have found

plenty of followers in the mob, but fortunately for the cause of law and order, he did not materialize, and before the crowd could proceed to extremities the sheriff with a dozen men whom he had called upon to aid him forced a passage through the mass, and with the help of the police hustled the prisoners into the jail, where the iron doors clanged behind them.

Not till then did the perspiring officials breathe freely. The mob hung about for a while, and threats of a later raid upon the jail were freely bandied about. These, however, were but the vaporings of the more reckless spirits, and before long the crowd began to break up and drift away.

Dutton, the chief of police, having relieved himself of responsibility by turning his prisoners over to the sheriff, proceeded at once to the bank, where the President, Mr. Eldridge, was anxiously awaiting him. Phil and Tom at the chief's invitation had come with him, and as they mounted the steps of the bank, Dick too came hurrying up.

Together they went into the president's room, where he was engaged in earnest discussion with some of the directors of the bank. They were cordially received, and Dutton plunged at once into the story of the pursuit and capture of the thieves. He gave full

credit to the Radio Boys for the part they had taken and they were warmly thanked by Mr. Eldridge and his associates for their coolness and courage.

Then Dutton turned over the money that had been recovered, and all watched eagerly as the president counted it carefully.

"Ten thousand, two hundred and fifty dollars," he announced finally.

"I hope," ventured Dutton, "that that's about all that the thieves got away with, Mr. Eldridge."

"I wish it were," replied the president soberly, "but as a matter of fact their loot amounted to fifty thousand dollars!"

A gasp of astonishment ran round the room.

CHAPTER IV

Wonders of Radio

"What?" cried Phil in dismay. "Fifty thousand dollars? Are you sure, Mr. Eldridge?"

"Only too sure," the latter replied. "You see it is pay day for the mills with their thousands of operatives, and the money for the payrolls was being made up, so that the money was out of the vaults and within full sight and reach of the robber. The band couldn't have selected a moment that would have been more favorable for them. In fact, it was so well timed that I am inclined to think that the scoundrels must have had some confederate in the town who was familiar with the customs and working of the bank."

"That means then," said Dutton, "that the thieves still have forty thousand dollars of the bank's money."

"Just about that," agreed Mr. Eldridge, "and it's a pretty heavy amount for a bank of this size to lose. Luckily it will not affect our solvency, for the bank is perfectly sound, but it makes a dent in our surplus that we don't

like to think about. Of course, we'll offer a reward and do everything in our power to have the gang apprehended. We'll hope for the best. In the meantime, I want to tell you again how deeply grateful I am to you all for the splendid work you did in capturing two of the robbers and recovering so large an amount of the money."

"Perhaps you want us to keep the amount of the loss quiet for fear of starting a run on the bank," suggested Dutton, as the party prepared to take their leave.

"Not at all," returned Mr. Eldridge quickly. "Thank you for the suggestion, but I shall follow a policy of perfect frankness. It's silence and mystery that breed distrust. Spread the news as widely as you can that this loss will affect only the stockholders of the bank and that the bank is able and ready to pay every depositor dollar for dollar. We shall issue a signed statement to that effect, and I think that the bank stands high enough in the confidence of our people to have that statement accepted at par value."

They bade him goodby and went out through the bank and down the steps. They were questioned eagerly, and told freely what Mr. Eldridge had said. There was a buzz of excited comment as the amount of the loss

was made known and deep regret was the prevailing note.

If this was lacking in any one, that person perhaps was a dissipated looking young man, about twenty years old, who stood near the bottom of the steps and stared with unfriendly eyes at the boys as they passed him, at the same time muttering something in a low tone.

Dick hesitated an instant as though inclined to go back.

"Did you hear what 'Rocks' Gurney said?" he asked.

"Something about 'heroes' ", answered Phil. "I suppose that was meant for a dig at us. But come along," he continued giving a tug at his companion's sleeve. "Don't waste any thought on anything that Gurney says. He doesn't count. He's never liked the color of our eyes and hair, and he's been especially sore on you ever since your father fired him from the bank for neglecting his work."

"One thing struck me as a little queer," remarked Tom.

"I happened to catch his eye just as some one mentioned the fact that the bank's loss amounted to forty thousand dollars, and if there was ever a look of satisfaction in any one's eyes it was in his at that moment. It was more than satisfaction; it was triumph. It was all the more noticeable too because

every one else seemed to be sorry and indignant. You might almost have thought that the bank's loss meant money in his pocket."

"He's a rotter all right," said Dick, "and I suppose he's got such a grudge against the bank because it dispensed with his valuable services that he takes delight in any bad luck that comes to it. That would be just about his size."

"He's getting pretty near the end of his rope in this town anyway," remarked Phil. "He's in with the gambling crowd and he's been mixed up with two or three more or less shady affairs lately. He's bad medicine and the less we have to do with him the better."

For the next two weeks the bank robbery furnished the chief topic of conversation in Castleton. Nothing on so bold and large a scale had ever stirred up the town.

As Mr. Eldridge had surmised, the frank and prompt statement issued by the bank had a beneficial effect, and there was no run on the institution.

Descriptions of the robbers were sent broadcast all over the United States, and a reward was offered for their apprehension. Especial emphasis was laid on the scar that disfigured the leader of the band, and it was thought by the more hopeful that this mark of identification would lead to his speedy cap-

ture. But as the days passed by and lapsed into weeks without any news of the outlaws this hope began to wane and the conclusion gained ground that they had perhaps gotten over the border into Canada or Mexico.

Mr. Weston made speedy progress toward recovery and was soon able to be around again with his arm in a sling. But though he mended bodily, his spirits were greatly depressed. A large part of his own modest savings was invested in the stock of the bank, and the assessment that was levied on the stockholders to make good the loss occasioned by the robbery taxed him severely. He chafed moreover at the inaction forced upon him. Dick, who idolized his father, was full of rage at the men who had brought this shadow upon him, and it would have gone hard with any of the bandits if he could have got them within his reach.

The two robbers already in jail had been interrogated again and again in the hope that they might let something fall that would give a clue to the whereabouts of their chief. But despite all threats and cajoling, they remained stubbornly non-committal. Their finger prints had been sent to the police headquarters of all the great cities, as well as their photographs. By means of these they had been identified as desperate criminals and members

of the notorious "Muggs" Murray gang. And as Murray was known to have a scar similar to that of the leader of the bandits in the Castleton robbery, it was pretty clearly established that he had been in command on that occasion. So far so good. But where was Murray? That was the question that thousands were asking, but which the police and detectives, even spurred on as they were by the promise of a reward, had not yet been able to answer.

That same question was being asked by the Radio Boys also by means of their sending sets. They had powerful transmitters, and scarcely a night passed without their sending out a reminder that "Muggs" Murray was wanted for the robbery of the Castleton bank. With the reminder they sent also a description of the outlaw and mentioned the five thousand dollar reward that was offered for his capture. They flung out these messages into the ether, knowing that it was only a chance, but still that it was a chance. They knew that their message was heard by thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands within a radius of hundreds of miles. Who knew but that one of those thousands might have seen such a man an hour before receiving the message and might be able to tell the police where they could lay their hands on him?

Dick, Tom and Phil were at the latter's home one evening, bending over the radio set, when Professor Denby of the Castleton Academy dropped in upon them. He was a genial, likeable man, with none of the traditional primness of the pedagogue about him, and the boys had a great esteem and regard for him and had always regarded him more as a comrade than a teacher. He in his turn liked the boys immensely and was a frequent and welcome visitor to their homes.

"Transmitting again, eh?" he said with a smile as he shook hands all around and took the chair that Phil proffered him. "You boys are radio fans of the thirty-third degree."

"You're responsible," laughed Phil. "It was you who set our feet upon this path of crime. When it comes to radio, that's your middle name. There's nobody in town that's such a dyed-in-the-wool enthusiast."

"Or that knows so much about it," added Dick.

"Guilty on the first charge, but not sure about the second," said the professor. "At the rate you fellows are going you'll soon be able to give me points. But what are you sending out now? Something special?"

"Broadcasting the story of the robbery once more," answered Phil. "We've been

doing that for several nights, but nothing has come of it yet and we're beginning to think it's a forlorn hope."

"Not by any means," replied Mr. Denby. "Radio has a long arm, and it may reach out and clutch its fingers on a rascal's neck even at the other end of the continent."

"It used to be possible," he continued, warming to his subject as he always did when the conversation turned on radio, "that a criminal could jump on a train, ride for a few hours until he came to a remote country place and feel as safe as though he were in the wilds of Labrador. The chances were a hundred to one that the people of a lonely little village or of a sparsely settled farming district would never hear of him or his crime, and he could lie low there in reasonable security until the hue and cry was over. But that time passed with the coming of radio. In the very farmhouse that the criminal may be approaching or past which he may be riding or walking, there may be a radio set at which the farmer or his family may have been sitting a few minutes or hours before and hearing the whole story. A stranger attracts attention anyway, and they might recognize him at once and put the police on his track. Instead of a few sleuths being on the rascal's track, there are hundreds of thousands."

"In other words," put in Phil, "radio organizes the whole country into a society for the detection of crime."

"Exactly," agreed Mr. Denby. "It weaves an invisible net around the criminal and multiplies the chances of his being caught in the meshes sooner or later. He can't go to any place where the radio hasn't been before him. At the most he can go sixty miles an hour. A radio message can go at the rate of 186,000 miles a second. It puts the rogue under a tremendous handicap. Then too, the very knowledge that he has of the odds against him makes him nervous and uneasy and his very manner may betray him. That's why I say that you're not working on a forlorn hope in keeping after 'Muggs' Murray."

"Well, we're keeping everlastingly at it anyway and we may hit the bulls-eye at last," replied Dick. "But now we've finished sending for tonight. What's the matter with switching off and doing a little listening in? The Chicago station has a good program on for tonight."

All were agreeable, and for perhaps half an hour they sat back and listened. They did not have to use earpieces, as Phil's set was equipped with a loud speaker, and they heard the monologues and music as clearly as

though the performers were in an adjoining room.

During an interval they were chatting together, when suddenly a voice was heard that brought Phil to his feet in an instant.

"By the great horn spoon!" he ejaculated. "If that isn't Steve Elwood's voice I'm a Chinaman.

"Go way," said Tom incredulously. "You're spoofing us."

"No kidding," replied Phil earnestly. "I've heard it too often to be mistaken."

They listened intently, but now all they could hear was a medley of screeches and wailing with only a few broken words that were intelligible.

"Sounds like the three witches in Macbeth," remarked Dick. "Guess you were dreaming things, Phil."

"Dreaming nothing," Phil answered. "It's static that's kicking in and making all this racket."

"It didn't bother us much when we were listening to the concert," objected Dick.

"That's because the weather isn't as hot up here as it is in Texas," explained Phil. "It's the heat that makes all kinds of trouble in radio. Just wait until I do a little tuning. I'll get in consonance with Steve's wave length in a jiffy."

He moved his knobs with expert skill, and in a moment or two his efforts were rewarded. Into the room came a voice about which there could be no mistake. All recognized it as that of their absent chum, who for some months past had been serving with the Texas Rangers along the troubled Mexican border.

Static still persisted to some extent, and they occasionally missed a word or part of a sentence, but they caught the sense of the message without much difficulty.

"Hello there, Castleton," the voice said. "Steve Elwood talking. Are you getting me? If so give me the signal. Have--- important--- to tell you. It's--- Muggs Murray."

CHAPTER V

On the Trail

The boys jumped to their feet, wild with excitement, and even Mr. Denby was shaken out of his usual calm.

"Muggs Murray!" cried Phil.

"Good old Steve," exclaimed Dick jubilantly. "Is it possible that he can give us a tip on the scoundrel?"

"Looks like it," said Tom. "Let's get busy on the sending."

They switched off the receiver and Phil sent out his message.

"We got you, Steve," he radioed. "I'm going to repeat this at minute intervals for the next five minutes. Then I'll switch off and listen for your answer. For the love of Pete, old boy, keep at it if it takes all night. This means more to us than you know."

Five times he repeated the message, and then they turned on the receiver and sat breathlessly awaiting a possible answer.

It was not long in coming, and this time static was almost eliminated.

"I'm here with bells on, Phil," said the voice, "and ready to pour into your shell-like ears the sad story of my life."

"Sounds like Steve," chuckled Dick. "Can't you see the old freckled-faced, red-haired sinner sitting at the sending set with a grin spreading from ear to ear?"

"Now listen, Phil, and the rest of you yaps, for I suppose Dick and Tom are with you as usual," the voice went on. "I've got something to tell you about that fellow Muggs Murray that you've been broadcasting about, and who seems to have stirred up quite a bit of excitement in your young mind. At least, I think I have, if he's the same fellow I had a little mixup with lately. I didn't know a thing about this robbery until I caught your broadcast tonight. Down in this neck of the woods we don't see much but the local papers, and they didn't carry the story. Too far off, I suppose. What news we get is mostly about the ructions the Mexicans are stirring up, and take it from me that's plenty. Those fellows are sure keeping our hands full.

"Now I tell you what let's do. You go ahead and tell me the full story of the robbery. What you sent out tonight was only an outline, and I'm rather hazy about the details. Be sure to give me the last bit you know about the man's appearance. I've had

a pretty good slant at the fellow I have in mind, and I'll see if the description tallies. I'm going to stop now and listen to your dulcet voice and then I'll horn in again."

The voice stopped, much to the chagrin of the listeners, who were keyed up to a high pitch of impatience.

"Hurry, Phil, and give him the dope," urged Dick. "I'm just crazy to get him started again."

"The old rascal is just keeping us on the anxious seat on purpose," grumbled Tom. "He knows he has a good story and he wants to get our goat by keeping us waiting."

Phil needed no urging and he was soon giving the details for which Steve had asked. He went into all the particulars he remembered about the bandit leader's height, dress and appearance, dwelling particularly on the scar. His companions put in a reminder here and there; and by the time he had finished the description was as complete as anyone could want.

"That gives him an ear-full," remarked Tom. "Now if he'll only get a hustle on and tell us what he knows."

"Perhaps it won't amount to anything after all," said Dick pessimistically. "There may be hundreds of men with scars just like Muggs Murray."

"To be sure that wouldn't in itself prove anything," agreed Phil, "but there may be other things to corroborate it. At any rate give the old boy a chance to tell his story before you begin glooming."

A short time elapsed, althought it seemed to the boys like ages, and then Steve's voice again made itself heard.

"Good stuff," it said. "'Pon my word, Phil, you ought to be a lawyer. Of course, you left out a good deal I'd have been glad to know about that airplane stunt of yours and Dick's, but I put that down to your natural modesty. Glad you jugged two of the robbers anyway. Now 'listen my children and you shall hear' not 'of the midnight ride of Paul Revere' but of something that concerned yours truly a good deal more.

"Two days ago there was an attempt to hold up this station. We're accustomed to rough stuff of that kind down here, and we usually try to be ready for it. At the time there was only Captain Bradley and myself in the place. Bradley, by the way, is the captain of the troop of Texas Rangers that I'm connected with, and believe me he's some man. You'd like him if you came to know him. The pay chest of the troop was in my cabin, and though we try to keep that sort of thing quiet somehow or other it must

have got abroad. We were going over some papers together, when suddenly a shot came through the window and took off the captain's hat. Naturally, that peeved him somewhat, he not being a lamb by nature, and he reached for his gun, while at the same time I grabbed mine. The door was locked, but on looking through one of the peepholes with which the place is provided, we saw half a dozen fellows coming full tilt for the cabin while at the same time a volley of bullets whistled their way into the logs. Our guns barked back and one of the fellows went down. We kept our revolvers going, and I guess the gang thought that there were a good many more of us in the cabin than they had counted on, for after doing a little more shooting they picked up their pal and beat it back out of range.

"There they stopped and held a pow-wow. We reloaded and then I got out my glasses and took a good squint at the band. The fellow who was evidently the leader was the dead image of the man you described. He had a scar that reached almost from his mouth to his ear on his right cheek and tallied with your man in all the other respects you mention. He wasn't a greaser either. Just the tough gunman type you see in the slums of any big city. I studied him hard

and know I would recognize him instantly again if I should ever meet him.

"They palavered a while and then concluded that they had had enough of our game and called it off. They rode off toward the Mexican border, that no man's land that is as full of tough characters as a dog is full of fleas. Some time later a bunch of our boys who had heard the shooting came hurrying up, and the captain put himself at their head and went in pursuit. But the fracas happened just at the edge of dusk, and in the darkness the fellows got away. Probably crossed the Rio Grande.

"Now, that's my little spiel and you can take it for what it is worth. It's the same kind of a man as robbed the Castleton bank and he's playing the same kind of a game. Of course, Laguna is a long way off from Castleton, but he's had plenty of time to get here, and as a matter of fact, he'd naturally put a big stretch of country between himself and your town. If I were you I'd give the tip to the detectives who are looking for him and let them come down and get him if he proves to be the man they're after. Or better still, come down and get him yourselves. I'm not kidding. Come down and get him yourselves. Mull this over in what you call your brains and call me again in five minutes."

The voice ceased, and the listeners looked at each other with a new thought stirring in their minds.

"What do you think of it?" Phil asked of Mr. Denby.

"If you are referring to the clue," answered the professor, "I think it's a good one. Certainly it is one that you can't afford to disregard. Detectives have traveled across a continent on much less than that. Of course, he may not prove to be the man, but there's at least a good chance that he is. Nothing venture, nothing have.

"As to what he says about you boys going down there yourselves and trying to round the man up," he continued, "that of course, is a matter on which I wouldn't venture an opinion. Your families," he smiled, "may have decided views on that point."

"I suppose they might," agreed Phil somewhat dismally. "Still they let us go before in that matter of running down the counterfeiters, which was quite as dangerous as this if not more so. And you'll notice that we came through that all right."

"Yes," agreed the professor, "but you have to admit that you had some mighty close shaves when there was only a slender margin between you and death. Your folks may

think that there's such a thing as tempting Fate, you know."

"But just to think of it," mused Phil. "Those Texas plains, the Rio Grande, the free wild life—"

"Sleeping under the stars," interrupted Tom, "mixing it with the greasers—"

"And above all, nabbing that scoundrel who shot my father," put in Dick. "Fellows, there's no two ways about it. We've just got to go."

"Seems to be unanimous," remarked the professor looking around with a smile at the eager, ardent faces, "but all the same it will bear a lot of thinking over. Better call up your friend again and see just what he has in mind."

Phil complied with the suggestion, his words fairly tumbling over each other in his eagerness.

"You've got us guessing, Steve," he said. "Just how much in earnest were you in what you said in your wind-up? Talk turkey now. What's the game? Get right down to brass tacks."

After a brief interval Steve's answer came.

"Stirred up the animals did I with that innocent remark of mine?" he said. "Well, Phil, old boy, here's what I mean, straight from the shoulder.

"I want you and Dick and Tom to come down here and join me in the service of the Texas Rangers. They're the finest kind of a bunch, straight fellows, dead shots, daring riders, just the kind of men you boys would like to pal up with. The border troubles are getting so serious here that we need more men. Of course, there are Government troops here but only a handful, and the border line is so long that they can't possibly police it. So we Rangers get in and help on the job. The discipline is good—our Captain Bradley is an old West Pointer—but it's nothing like so irksome as it is in the regular army. I can guarantee you plenty of excitement and adventure with very little of the red tape.

"Above all we're short of flying men and we need them more than anything else. In chasing the Mexican guerrillas or warning of their approach on one of their frequent raids they're invaluable. Now, you and Dick and Tom are as much at home in a plane as you are on the ground, and the job is just cut out for you. I've talked the matter over with Captain Bradley and he's keen to have you in our flying service.

"Then as to that matter of Muggs Murray, I honestly think you'd stand a first-class chance of nabbing him if you came along with us. In the course of your work, aloft

in the air, you'd be called on to scan practically every foot of the border in this section. Sooner or later you'd be likely to come across him and his band. And you'd have the whole troop of Rangers behind you to help you round him up.

"Now that's the whole story. I'll have to stop now as I have to turn in a report. Think it over carefully, old scout, and call me up tomorrow night. Regards to the rest of the boys and so long."

The voice ceased, leaving the listeners' minds in a tumult.

"Are you game, fellows?" asked Phil.

"You bet," replied Dick emphatically.

"Lead me to it," exclaimed Tom.

"Well," said Phil, "we'll put it up to the folks. I have a hunch that before many days have passed we'll be in Texas, down by the Rio Grande."

CHAPTER VI

A Lively Fight

"If you do get there," remarked Mr. Denby as he rose to go, "I can see that there isn't going to be much monotony in your lives for the next few months. You boys certainly have a knack for finding adventure, and what is more important still a knack of coming through it somehow with a whole skin. Let's hope that this won't prove an exception to the rule. At any rate I'm glad that you are going to have a chance to ferret out and capture that rascal Murray. Now," he added with a smile, "you see that I was right when I denied that you were relying on a forlorn hope in trusting to radio. It showed you tonight what it could do."

"I should say it did," agreed Phil warmly as he accompanied him to the door. "It's the most wonderful thing in the world."

He bade the professor good night and returned to his companions. They were all too wrought up to think of sleep, and they sat up late discussing the possibilities that had opened up so suddenly before them.

The next day was spent chiefly in argument with their respective families. As they had feared, they met at first with the stiffest sort of opposition. Their parents took a much more sober view of the enterprise than did the boys themselves and conjured up all kinds of harrowing things that might happen to them. But the boys urged their case with such fervor and persistence that Phil and Dick finally carried the day.

Tom's task was the more difficult, as his parents lived in Chicago, and he had to communicate with them by radio. His father had a powerful set and was almost as much of a radio "fan" as his son himself, and both were kept busy the greater part of the day in transmitting and receiving messages arguing the case pro and con. But from Tom's point of view the day was well spent, for he was able at the end of it to come to his chums with the joyous news that his father had yielded a final, albeit a reluctant consent.

So that it was in a jubilant mood that they called up Steve that night and told him that the preliminary battle had been won and that he might expect them at some time within the next week or ten days.

"Bully," was Steve's reply. "Best news I've heard since Sitting Bull sat down. Come a runnin'. And say, fellows, if you can, bring

the Arrow along with you. It's a dandy machine and you're so used to it that you can probably get better results with it than you could with any plane we could furnish you. It'll be a nice cross country trip for you, and beat traveling in stuffy railroad cars, to say nothing of making better time. I'll tend to everything on this end of the line, see that your quarters are prepared for you and every other little thing. Believe me, fellows, you're going to have the time of your young lives."

There was a host of questions to be asked and answered, but by the time that the interchange of messages had ceased, the boys had the fullest information they needed to form their plans and map out their journey.

It goes without saying that they had informed the authorities of all that they had learned as to the possible whereabouts of Muggs Murray. The Texas police authorities were communicated with and were asked to give all the assistance in their power. Mr. Eldridge further stated that the bank would send on a special detective at its own expense to run down the clue.

"Now," remarked Phil, when they had thus disburdened their mind of all the information they had in the matter, "we've done our duty by the bank and the police, and it's up to them to do what they think best. But

we'll play our own little game our own way and we'll see who comes out best. I don't mind saying that I think we have the inside track."

"I feel the same way," agreed Dick.

"At any rate if we fail it won't be for lack of trying," concluded Tom.

The next few days were busy ones, for a host of preparations had to be made for the journey. The boys had hailed with delight the suggestion of Steve that they make the journey by plane, and the first thing they did was to equip it with a complete radio apparatus. Great stress had been laid upon this by Mr. Denby, who rendered them valuable aid in the installation of the set, the making of the counterpoise that served in place of a ground connection and a variety of other details in which he was past master.

"Nobody ought to go aloft these days whether in a balloon or an airplane without a complete radio equipment," he counseled. "All Uncle Sam's Air Mail planes have them, and by that means are able to keep in constant touch with the earth beneath them. If a storm is coming, the Government broadcasting station can send out storm warnings to the air pilots so that they can descend until the storm is past. If they are in doubt as to where they can find a safe landing field,

all they have to do is to radio and find out. In that way they can avoid the danger of wreck that is always present when they have to make forced landings. In storm or fog the radio is like an invisible thread guiding the plane to safety.

"Especially will you find it indispensable in the work you are planning to do in Texas," he continued. "Your plane might be disabled and you be forced to descend in a desert, where, if left alone, you might perish of hunger and thirst. The radio will tell your troop where you are and bring them to your rescue. Or if you are flying on reconnoitering service, you can tell the men on the ground below just what you are seeing without having to return to the ground. On the other hand, if your commanding officer wants to give you additional orders, he can radio the message to you up there in the sky just as easily as he could give it to you if you were seated at his desk. In a hundred ways you will find it a vast convenience, and in many cases an absolute necessity."

They felt the force of the reasoning and worked heartily with his assistance in the perfecting of the set. And when one day the installation was complete, Phil and Dick went up on a trial flight to try it out, Tom remain-

ing at the radio station in Phil's home to send and receive.

To the delight of all three, the set worked to perfection. Phil and Dick were wearing the special helmet constructed for aviators to shut out the roar of the motor so that they could perceive the radio signals, and they had no trouble at all in receiving Tom's messages. He on his part had equal luck in catching without difficulty the signals of his friends, and all were in high, good humor at the success of the tests.

Phil and Dick, after an hour or more spent in this way, were flying back toward Castleton and were still some miles distant from the town. They were only a few hundred feet above the ground and could see everything beneath them with great distinctness.

Suddenly Dick touched Phil's arm.

"Something going on down there," he said.

Phil looked in the direction indicated, and saw what seemed to be an angry conversation going on between a girl and man. Even as he looked, the girl started to run. The man ran after her and caught her by the arm and seemed to be trying to drag her toward an automobile drawn up at the side of the road.

"Here's where we get busy," exclaimed Phil.

He grasped a lever and the machine with

a great sweep came down in a field only a short distance from the couple.

In a moment the Radio Boys were out of the fuselage and hurrying toward the scene of commotion.

As they neared the two, the girl gave a glad cry, wrenched her wrist from the man who now seemed willing enough to release her and came running toward them.

"Oh, I am so glad you came," she cried, the tears streaming down her face.

"What's the trouble?" asked Phil.

"It's that man," replied the girl. "I was walking along the road when he stopped his car and asked me for some directions. I gave them to him and then he wanted me to get into the car and take a ride with him. I had never seen him in my life before and I refused and started to run. He ran after me and caught my arm and tried to make me get in the car."

"That's enough," said Phil briefly. "Dick, just look after this young lady for a moment."

He went up to the man who had been standing in a defiant attitude beside his car, his cap drawn over his eyes. As Phil approached, the man looked up and Phil recognized "Rocks" Gurney.

"So you're the cur that insulted this girl," said Phil with cutting scorn.

Gurney flushed purple.

"What's that you called me?" he cried in a fury. "Take it back or it will be the worse for you."

For answer Phil's fist shot out and caught Gurney full on the point of the jaw, and the latter measured his length in the dust of the road.

He was up again in a moment, spluttering with rage, and made a rush at Phil. The latter avoided the rush and met Gurney with a blow that jarred him to his heels. Then for a few minutes they went at it hammer and tongs.

Gurney was a trifle heavier than Phil and two years older. But he was dissipated and self-indulgent, and no match for the trained athlete he was up against. Phil went round him like a cooper round a barrel, avoiding his lunges and getting in his blows where they would do the most good. In a few minutes the fight was over, and Gurney lay in the road, half sobbing with shame and pain.

"I guess that'll be about all," remarked Phil. "Now Gurney, get into your car and drive wherever you like. Only get away quick."

"I'll get even with you for this," mumbled Gurney through his swollen lips, as he climbed painfully into the machine.

"I suppose you'll try to," answered Phil, "but that isn't worrying me."

With an imprecation flung back over his shoulder, Gurney started off. Phil watched him until the car was out of sight and then turned to Dick and the girl. The latter was profuse in her thanks. They learned that she lived only a little ways up the road in the direction opposite to that in which Gurney had gone. They felt safe therefore, in leaving her, and having said goodby they climbed again into their machine and mounted into the upper air.

"You certainly trimmed him good and proper," remarked Dick.

"He had it coming to him," replied Phil. "It was a sin and a shame though," he added with a grin, "to spoil such a gorgeous suit of clothes. Did you see how he was dressed? Solomon in all his glory hadn't anything on him."

"That was a nifty car too," said Dick. "What's made him blossom out so suddenly? A little while ago he was looking seedy. Now he seems to have slathers of money. Where does he get it?"

"Search me," Phil answered carelessly.

CHAPTER VII

Crooked Work

"There!" exclaimed Phil, two days later straightening up, and wiping his hands on a piece of cotton waste. "If that engine doesn't tick like a Swiss watch now, it won't be our fault. It ought to make the run to Texas without a miss."

"I've got a hunch it will," said Dick, confidently. "Let's see if we've done everything now," and he proceeded to count off the operations on his fingers. "Scraped carbon out of cylinders; took up on main bearings and big end bearings, overhauled oil pump and strainer, cleaned spark plugs and timer points, put in new piston rings. Whew! Sounds like a lot when you say it slow, doesn't it?"

"It seems to me it's quite a lot no matter how you say it," remarked Tom, "but with an aeroplane, it certainly pays to have everything right."

"You can bet it does," said Phil, emphatically. "When you're a thousand or two feet up, it gives you a mighty comfortable

feeling to know that everything is in fine condition."

"And a mighty uncomfortable one if you think it isn't," supplemented Tom, with a laugh.

"I'll say so!" agreed Phil. "But now that we've done so much work, let's take a trial flight. If we find everything O. K., we can start for Texas early to-morrow morning. How does that sound?"

"Great! Fine!" exclaimed his friends.

"All right, then; hop in," said Phil. "You spin her over, Dick, will you?"

"Sure thing," acquiesced Dick. "Just say the word when you're ready."

Phil climbed into the pilot's seat, and Tom clambered in beside him. Dick gave the big propeller a whirl, and the motor started with a roar. Phil quickly throttled it down, and Dick cast off the holding ropes and clambered to his seat.

"The old motor sounds pretty sweet," he yelled.

Phil nodded his head, and after opening and closing the throttle a few times to warm up the engine and test its response, he "gave it the gas" and the plane glided forward over the green turf.

Phil was just about to move the elevating

controls when his action was suddenly arrested by Dick's voice in his ear.

"Don't go up, Phil," he yelled, excitedly. "Something is wrong with the guy wires. I saw one break just a second ago."

Phil closed the throttle, and the plane slowed down and came to rest.

"You must be seeing things, Dick," said Phil, twisting around in his seat. "I tested out every wire in the machine a couple of days ago, and they were all in fine condition."

"Well, I saw one break, just the same," said Dick, positively. "We'd better go over them all once more. It does seem queer, though."

"Well, accidents will happen," said Phil, removing his goggles and leather helmet. "Let's have a look at the one that you saw snap, Dick. Which was it?"

"Just a second and I'll show you," replied Dick, leaping to the ground. "It was this one over here," and he picked up a long wire that was trailing on the ground.

Phil took the wire from him, and rapidly followed up its length until he came to the loose end.

What he found there made him emit a long whistle.

"Say!" he exclaimed. "It's no wonder this wire broke. It's been filed half through!"

"Filed!" exclaimed Dick, seizing the wire

from Phil, while Tom leaped to the ground and came running around to where they stood. "It can't be, Phil. Who would have done such a thing as that?"

"I don't know, but just take a look at it," said Phil. "You can see the smooth part left by the file, and the rough surface where the wire actually parted."

"Let's see, Dick," said Tom, and all three boys examined the broken wire carefully.

"You're right, Phil; that was no accident," was Dick's verdict, and Tom agreed with him. "There's only one man I know that would be capable of doing such a thing," he added.

Phil nodded his head. "Rocks Gurney," he said, briefly. "You know after that licking I gave him he swore to get even with me, and this is the method he has used."

"Just like him, too," exclaimed Dick, indignantly. "Why, if that stay had broken while we were in the air, we'd have been in serious trouble."

"Luckily for us, he filed a bit too deep, and the stay broke sooner than he thought it would," said Phil. "The chances are he didn't stop at just that one, either. We'd better go over every bit of the machine, and see if he's monkeyed with anything else."

This they did, and it was not long before

Tom discovered a deep nick in another wire. In all they found five wires in different parts of the machine that had been partially cut through, enough to have caused disaster had they given way while the machine was in the air.

"I'm going to make inquiries and find out if anybody around the house has seen anything of Gurney or any other suspicious person lately," said Phil. "I don't think the machine was tampered with during the night, because the hangar is securely locked, and I didn't notice anything wrong when I opened up this morning."

The Strongs employed an old negro gardener, and when questioned he remembered seeing somebody near the hangar the previous evening while the family was at supper, but he thought it was some friend of the boys, and had not paid much attention to him.

"But didn't you recognize him?" asked Phil.

"Ah couldn't rightly say Ah did," said the old negro, doubtfully. "Ah cain't see much widout mah specs, but come to think of it, he looked somethin' like young Marse Gurney. It was gettin' powerful dark, though, an' Ah ain't sure."

"I guess your eyes didn't fool you, Mose," said Phil, grimly. "There's no doubt in my

mind that it was Gurney, all right, but I suppose there's no way to prove it."

"Let's hunt him up and accuse him of it," exclaimed Tom, hotly.

"Oh, what's the use," said Phil. "He'd only deny it, and we haven't any time to waste on him, anyway. It won't take us long to replace the wires, and we know everything else is all right, because we've just finished overhauling them."

His friends reluctantly agreed to leave Gurney's punishment to some future date, and returned to the aeroplane. It was no great task to renew the damaged wires and pull them taut with turnbuckles, and soon the machine was as good as ever. After this, they started once more for a trial flight, and this time nothing occurred to hinder them. The motor worked beautifully, and the boys were delighted with its performance.

"I told you those new piston rings would make a big improvement in the motor," said Dick. "I put the same kind in our automobile, and it made a new car out of it."

"Yes, unless you've got good compression, you can't get power," agreed Phil. "But I guess the machine is fit for anything, now. 'Texas or bust to-morrow. How about it?"

"Bet your sweet life," exclaimed Dick, and Tom was no less enthusiastic. After a few

more sweeping circles, Dick brought the aeroplane gently to earth, and the boys proceeded to fill the gasoline and oil tanks, and pack their traveling equipment aboard.

The following morning they were up at daylight, and after a hearty breakfast went out to the hangar, accompanied by their families, who had all congregated at the Strong's to see them off. The boys wheeled the aeroplane out, and made a last inspection, to make sure that it had not by any chance been tampered with during the night. Everything was just as they had left it, however, and after saying good-bye the boys climbed to their places.

CHAPTER VIII

The Jaws of Death

A light breeze was already blowing, and amid cries of farewell and encouragement from those on the ground the boys headed their aeroplane into this and took off to a perfect start just as the rim of the morning sun appeared over the horizon. The glorious beams flooded the beautiful green landscape below them, and the boys felt a wonderful surge and uplift of spirit that matched the upward flight of the aeroplane as it climbed swiftly toward the clouds. Higher and higher they went, until the little group of waving figures became mere dots, and then were entirely lost to sight.

The motor roared its rhythmic speed song as Phil opened the throttle bit by bit, until their instruments registered an altitude of a thousand feet and a speed of ninety miles an hour. This was not by any means the maximum speed of which the machine was capable, but they were not out to break speed records, and preferred to save both gasoline and excessive wear on the engine.

The light breeze with which they had started freshened after awhile, but it was steady, and so did not interfere with their progress as an unsteady, puffy breeze would have done. The sun climbed higher in the heavens, but the wings of the plane protected them from the intensity of its rays, and they could not have been more comfortable nor felt more secure had they been seated in rocking chairs at home.

After they had been traveling a few hours, however, the weather became somewhat hazy, and suddenly, before Phil could change his course, they had run into a solid bank of dense gray fog that shut off the genial rays of the sun and sprinkled them liberally with moisture.

"Good night!" exclaimed Dick. "I hope it doesn't take us long to get out of this, Phil. It's as damp and cold as a vault."

"You don't want to get out any more than I do," returned Phil. "About the only thing we can do is hold our course and hope that the fog belt isn't very wide. Chances are we'll run out into the sunshine within a few miles."

This prediction proved to be far too optimistic, however, for after they had traveled half an hour the fog seemed even more dense than before, and at last Phil decided to de-

scend and try to get under it. Piloting an aeroplane in a fog is almost as bad as trying to walk blindfolded on the ground; one never knows what unexpected object he is going to collide with.

Phil's instruments told him that he was several hundred feet above the earth, but he knew that they were flying above hilly country, and it does not take a very pretentious mountain to be five hundred or so feet high. However, something must be risked in order to win clear of that clammy, clinging fog, so Phil headed the plane steadily earthward. At length the boys could see a lightening of the fog, upon which they all gave three lusty cheers. A few moments later they swept out into dazzling sunlight, but what they saw struck the shouts of gladness from their lips.

Directly in their line of flight towered a high and threatening wall of rock, so close that Dick and Tom gripped the sides of the aeroplane with every muscle tense, waiting for the crash to come.

On every hand rose other jagged peaks, so that to veer away from that grim wall ahead was useless, even had they had time. The last chance left them was to rise—to soar up and over that formidable barrier of weather-worn rock. To fail meant instant death

against the cliff or among the tumbled boulders at its base.

Phil tugged desperately at the elevating controls, and opened the throttle wide. The aeroplane responded instantly, sweeping up with a rush and roar. But they were terribly close to the cliff now, and the boys held their breath in an agony of suspense. Could the trusty machine make it, or would their trip end so quickly in black tragedy?

The cliff overhung at the top, and was fringed with a dense growth of scrub and small trees. Had it not been for this they would probably have won clear, but as it was, as they swept up, the wheels and framework under the fuselage caught in the dense undergrowth, and the boys could feel their speed suddenly slacken. The heavy pull underneath dragged the nose of the machine down, which caused the propeller to become entangled also. Phil tried desperately to get the machine clear of the tenacious brush and creepers, but finally he saw that they were hopelessly entangled. Fortunately, they were over the edge of the cliff, at any rate, and on a small fairly level plateau at the top of the mountain.

Bob shut off the motor, in order to keep the propeller from getting broken, and the

aeroplane crashed down among the bushes and floundered to a standstill.

The boys gazed ruefully at each other, and for a few moments no one spoke. Then Phil climbed slowly from his seat, and dropped to the ground, the others following suit.

"We're in a fine mess now," he remarked. "It looks to me as though this is about as near Texas as we get this trip."

"I don't care," said Tom, mopping big drops of perspiration from his face. "I'm glad enough to be right here. I don't mind admitting that I thought we were all goners a few minutes ago. I don't know yet how you got us over the edge, Phil."

"Neither do I," said Dick. "We must have gone pretty near straight up, Phil, to do it."

"I guess we did," nodded Phil. "It was the good old machine that did the trick, though, not I. But never mind about that now. Who can tell me how we're going to get away from here?"

"Is the machine damaged much?" inquired Dick. "I supposes we'd better make an examination and find out what's broken before we figure how to get away."

Fortunately for the boys, the aeroplane had suffered only minor injuries. Both rubber tires on the landing wheels were punc-

tured, and some of the framework supporting the wheels was badly bent, but there was no damage done that they could not repair on the spot.

"It might have been a lot worse," said Phil, at length. "I guess we'd better break out our axes and clear a space where we can work. After we've fixed the machine, I don't see anything for it but to chop a clear space big enough to get started in. And that's going to be some job, too, believe me."

"It certainly looks as though it might be," said Tom, gazing ruefully at the tangle of bushes and vines. "But before we start in, why not have something to eat. I've got a feeling that it's way past lunch time right now."

This suggestion met with instant approval, and they all ate with appetites unimpaired by their recent narrow escape. Having finished, they rested for a brief spell, and then, getting out their axes, attacked the thick undergrowth in earnest. After an hour's hard labor, they had a space cleared under and around the aeroplane, and then proceeded to straighten the bent framework and repair the tires. They worked fast, and in a surprisingly short time had everything in good shape. Then they turned their attenion to clearing a path sufficiently long to allow the aeroplane

to gather speed for its take-off. But here they found themselves in a quandary. Less than three hundred feet from the edge of the precipice there were a number of large trees, and to cut these down and level off the ground there was out of the question. Toward the brink of the cliff there was only the underbrush, but to take-off in that direction was perilous in the extreme. It meant heading straight for the edge of the abyss, and what if the aeroplane could not gather sufficient speed in that short distance to rise? In that event they might plunge downward, and so meet the very death that they had so lately avoided.

They fell to work on the stubborn undergrowth, but although they worked with desperate haste and energy, the sun was close to the horizon before they were finally ready to take their hazardous start.

"Well, fellows, I guess we've done all we can," said Phil at length, mopping at a countenance that was fiery red from sunburn and exertion. "We've done our part, and now it's up to the old machine. If it rises, all right, if not—" he shrugged his shoulders.

The boys climbed to their places in the machine with grave faces. Phil ran the motor until it was thoroughly warm, and then, with lips grimly set, opened the throttle.

CHAPTER IX

Deeds Of Darkness

Bushes and small trees in back of the machine were bent almost to the ground by the force of the wind driven rearward by the propeller, and the machine leaped ahead, bumping and swaying drunkenly over the uneven ground. Bushes caught at the widespread wings, retarding their speed, and the rough ground also hindered. As they approached the sheer edge of the chasm, and the awful expanse of empty air was almost under their wheels, Phil moved the elevating controls, but the aeroplane had not gathered sufficient speed to rise. It shot out over the brink of the abyss, the nose pointed downward, and with a tightening sensation around their hearts the boys realized that they were falling into the dizzy depths at sickening speed.

For a few seconds the aeroplane dropped like a stone, with Phil fighting to get control. The rocky floor of the canyon rushed up at them, but just at the moment when it seemed

as though they must strike, the aeroplane flattened out, quivered and vibrated, and then swooped upward into the rays of the setting sun.

The genial rays of the luminary had never seemed so welcome to the three Radio Boys, for they had steeled their hearts to meet death, and they felt as a condemned prisoner must when a last minute reprieve arrives.

For a time they flew in silence, each one thinking of this last narrow escape, and breathing a prayer of thankfulness that they were still alive and uninjured.

"Phil, that's twice you've pulled us out of the hole when it didn't look as though we had a chance," said Dick, at last. "What I want to say is, that you're competent to handle an aeroplane, and no mistake."

"Aw, shucks," said Phil; "either you or Tom would have done the same thing. I came pretty near to shaving the tops off a few of those boulders in that last dive, though. Another hundred feet, and our troubles would all have been over."

"I'd just as soon keep my troubles for a while," said Tom, with a feeble effort at a joke. "They don't bother me half as much as the thought of smashing down on those rocks does."

"That goes for me, too," said Dick. "But

let's let bygones be bygones. We're right here, scooting along at a fast clip, and not a scratch on us. The question then arises, 'where do we stop for the night'? It will be pretty dark in another hour."

"I'm going to land at the first decent place I can find on the far side of these hills," said Phil. "I don't feel any longing to land on top of another mountain."

"You said it!" agreed Tom. "The mere thought of it makes me see double. Land on the lowest place you can find on the map, Phil."

This was precisely what Phil intended to do, and it was not long before the opportunity appeared. Passing over the last of the hill range, they saw a level country spread out before them, which offered plenty of ideal places to make a landing. Phil volplaned down until they were only a hundred feet up, and then, selecting a smooth stretch of meadowland, glided swiftly down to a perfect landing.

"Wow!" exclaimed Tom, as he climbed out and stretched prodigiously. "This looks a little better than our last landing place, fellows. I'm going to break out some grub in short order, because this has been a hard day, and I'm as hungry as a wolf."

This suited the others, too, and they all

ate a hearty meal. Then they stretched out under the wings of their trusty machine, and slept soundly until awakened by the beams of the morning sun.

They lost no time in getting started, as mishaps of the day before. They spent an they were behind their schedule owing to the hour's hard work on the "Arrow", putting fresh oil into the engine, turning down grease cups, and testing the spark plugs. Then they packed up, Dick spun the propeller over, and the motor took hold instantly. Dick clambered in, and they soared aloft into the blue sky and gleaming sun. All day they flew without mishap, Dick taking a spell at the controls during the afternoon. They landed only once to replenish their gasoline and oil, and eat lunch. That day they covered over eight hundred miles, and when they landed for the night they figured that, barring accidents, they would reach Laguna early the following morning.

Steve had sent them a rough map showing the prominent landmarks in the vicinity of the Rangers' headquarters, and late in the forenoon they picked up the first of these, a large, mushroom-shaped rock, projecting forty feet from the level surface of the plain. Others followed in quick succession, and it was not long before they descried the long,

low building, with the Stars and Stripes floating above it. The boys were evidently expected, for they could see a number of men on the ground, who, as they drew nearer, waved broad-brimmed sombreros and shouted.

Phil, who was piloting the Arrow at the time, circled once or twice looking for a landing, and then, selecting a level stretch, landed gently.

The men who had been waving at them now ran in their direction, and as the boys descended they had no difficulty in recognizing Steve among the foremost.

"Hi, yi!" yelled Steve, exuberantly. "Welcome to Laguna, you worthless old mavericks! The boys never thought that you'd get here in that overgrown kite, but I told 'em you'd get here if you had to tie a balloon to it."

"Oh, nothing like that," grinned Phil, "although a balloon might have come in pretty handy at one time. But the old 'Arrow' usually gets where its going pretty near on schedule time."

"Well, we're all mighty glad to see you, anyway," declared Steve, "step up and I'll introduce you to this bunch of Piute Indians that have the nerve to call themselves Texas Rangers. They're a terrible bunch, but they all have one good point—they all hate greasers like poison."

After this foreword the Radio Boys were formally—or rather, informally—introduced to all the Rangers who happened to be present, and then they all gathered curiously about the aeroplane, and the boys had to explain some of its mysteries to the interested Rangers.

"That ought to put the fear of the Lord into them greasers, derned if it shouldn't," remarked one tall and sunburnt fellow, whom the others addressed s i m p l y as "Chips". "They'll think the great American Eagle has sure got after them at last."

"Well, it's pretty near time," remarked another. "They're sure gettin' peskier and meaner every day. We're too blamed easy with them, that's the trouble."

The others seemed to be of the same opinion, and as they walked toward headquarters, the boys heard more than one tale of looting and outrage, that made them glad that they were to engage in the work of prevention and punishment.

"Captain Bradley will be glad to know you've arrived," said Steve, after they had reached the bunk house and had washed up. "He didn't figure you'd get here much before tonight or maybe tomorrow morning, and he's gone to Austin on some official business. We expect him back in a day or so."

"Well, we can spend the time in getting acquainted," said Phil. "I only wish we had been here when you had the fight with those bandits that you told us about by radio."

"I sure wish you had," said Steve, "If we had that plane of yours then, we'd probably have caught them. As it is, though, they seem to have got away clean, and nobody's seen or heard of them since. They're bad medicine, that gang."

"They'd give a lot to have their hands on them back in Castleton," said Dick. "We haven't much doubt that the man with the scar that you saw is the same who engineered the holdup in the bank, and if he is, he's still got nearly $40,000 of the bank's money."

"Whew!" whistled Steve. "That's some chunk of kale, isn't it? If the Mexicans will stay quiet for a while, we'll get after that Murray bunch in earnest. But of course, our first duty is to guard against the greasers."

"Are they giving so much trouble at present, then?" queried Tom.

"Trouble!" echoed Steve, "why, a Mex's middle name is trouble. They're all bad, but some are 'specially bad. There's one gang, headed by a thieving, murdering son of a sea cook that they call Espato, that's got more poison in his make-up than a rattlesnake.

We've all got scores to pay off against him, but he's a cunning devil, and so far, while we've winged a number of his band, he's always got off scot free. We'll get him yet, though," and Steve's fingers unconsciously sought and gripped the butt of his revolver.

"Tell 'em about how he shot up Jack Sanderson's farm, Steve," said another of the Rangers, who was lounging nearby.

"Yes, that was an especially bad case," said Steve, with a dark frown on his sunburnt countenance. "This Espato and his gang picked out an especially dark night a few weeks ago, crossed the border, and surrounded Sanderson's farmhouse so quietly that nobody in the place dreamed that there was a Mex within ten miles of them. Some of them sneaked up to the barn and set it on fire, and when the people in the house saw the flames, of course, they rushed out to try and save the barn. As they ran out of the house, the Greasers picked them off one by one—wiped out the whole family. Then they looted the house, and set that on fire, too. And if we ever get our hands on the murdering gang — well ...." Steve did not finish the sentence, but his silence was more eloquent than words.

"There's nothing would be too bad for them!" exclaimed Dick, hotly. "I suppose

they got away before you fellows got news of the raid, eh?"

"Yes, they made for the border lickety spit. Of course, after we got the news, we set off after them, but they had too much of a start, and had reached their mountains before we could overtake them. Once there, it's hopeless to chase them any further — for, horsemen, anyway. That flying machine of yours might have better luck, though."

"The varmints hole down in them mountains, and it would take an army to locate them," explained the other Ranger. "There's caves and passes that only they know anything about."

"It's just possible that we might come at them from air, though, as Steve says," remarked Phil. "You can see a pretty big stretch of country when you're up five or six hundred feet."

"Gosh, it's a great sensation," said Steve, "will you give me a ride some day, Phil? It's a long time since I've had one."

"Surest thing you know," promised the young aviator. "I'll do a few tail spins and nose dives while you're along, just so you'll really enjoy the trip."

"Nothing doing," declared Steve, emphatically. "It will suit me if you keep on just

an even keel. I don't crave to imitate a pinwheel, not nohow."

Phil was about to make a laughing rejoinder, when suddenly there was a commotion outside, and a tall, handsome man, dressed in military fashion, strode into the room.

CHAPTER X

Flight and Pursuit

The Rangers all scrambled to their feet, and after Captain Bradley had asked a few questions and given some directions Steve introduced the Radio Boys to him.

"Here are the aviators I told you I was going to enlist, Captain," said Steve. "They just landed a few hours ago."

"Good enough," said the leader, heartily, and he shook hands with each in turn. "You're a mighty welcome addition to our force. We've got plenty of work cut out for you, too."

"We'll do our best to make good," said Phil. "After some of the stories we've heard about these cowardly raiders, we'll be glad to go on the warpath any time you say."

"That's the spirit," said the Captain, approvingly. "You'd better spend the next few days in getting acquainted and learning something of the country, though. I suppose your plane will require some attention after such a long drill, too."

"I wouldn't be surprised if we could find something to do on it," grinned Phil. "We like to keep it in good shape, and Dick here is a regular bug. He can worry more about a thousandth of an inch play in a bearing than anyone else I know."

"Well, it's best to be on the safe side," said Captain Bradley. "I understand from Steve that your plane is equipped with a wireless set, too."

"Yes, sir, we put that on after we decided to join the Rangers," said Phil.

"You can join right now, if you want to," said the Captain heartily. "That's entirely up to you, though, you know."

"The sooner the better, as far as I'm concerned," said Phil, glancing at his friends, who both nodded. "I guess we're ready if you are, sir."

"Fine!" exclaimed the Captain. "Quick action is what we like around here. Come on over to my shack."

Fifteen minutes later the boys had taken the oath, and were duly inducted into the Texas Rangers. They were supplied with the usual outfit of khaki shirt and trousers, high laced boots, and broad-brimmed sombrero. These clothes set off their athletic young figures to fine advantage, and the Captain in-

wardly congratulated himself on this addition to his forces.

The following days were busy ones for the Radio Boys. The Rangers were all crack shots with rifle and revolver, and daring and expert horsemen. The boys had had comparatively little experience in either of these exercises, but it was not long before they could ride and shoot in a manner to win words of commendation from the hardy men of the plains.

"That's purty dern good shootin'", remarked one old timer, as he watched Phil riddle a condensed milk can at a hundred paces. "'Pears to me, though, that that can would look better if it didn't have no cover on it. Let's have your rifle, young feller, an' I'll see if I can take it off."

Lifting the rifle to his shoulder, he fired three times in rapid succession, and the cover went spinning into the sand, neatly severed from the rest of the can.

"Good night!" exclaimed Tom, "that would be a good way to open a can if you were in a hurry."

"Some shooting," said Phil admiringly.

"Show him the poker chip trick, Dan," grinned Steve. "Here's a few I happend to have in my pocket."

Taking the chips, Dan drew his revolver,

and tossed five chips into the air. His revolver barked five times, and the five chips were shattered into fragments.

"How do they do it?" exclaimed Dick, amazed. "How long did you have to try before you could do that, Dan?"

"It's all a matter of practice, I reckon," said the other. "If you stay out here long, you'll learn to do the same thing. When your life's apt to depend on your quick shootin', you don't waste any time learnin' how."

In addition to riding and shooting, the boys took many flights over the surrounding country, accompanied by Steve or one of the other Rangers who was thoroughly familiar with the country. They soon had acquired a good working knowledge of the surrounding territory, and all felt competent to do useful service if called upon.

Nor was their opportunity long in coming. Early one morning one of the patrol riders came dashing into camp, leaped from his horse, and dashed into Captain Bradley's bungalow. A border town had been raided by the Mexicans the previous night. The citizens had put up a desperate fight, but they were far outnumbered, and during the battle several were killed. Fires were set at different points, and in the resultant confusion the

guerrillas made their escape, taking two girl prisoners with them.

As soon as the camp heard this news, all was bustle and preparation. Word was sent out for the Radio Boys to report at Captain Bradley's office immediately.

They found the Ranger leader pacing up and down the small room, a grim and relentless expression on his face.

He spoke in curt, incisive tones.

"I want you fellows to locate those desperados and, if possible, find out where they go," he ordered. "They've got a big lead over us, and our chances of catching them on horseback or even with automobiles is small. But with your aeroplane you may be able to succeed where we would not. And above all things, we want to get those two girls back. Let that be your first duty. You can start at once, can't you?"

"Yes, sir," said Phil. "We're ready, and so is the machine."

"Good!" exclaimed Bradley. "If you travel almost due south, you'll be the most likely to pick up their trail. Do your best, and luck be with you."

The boys saluted, and hurried out, breaking into a run as soon as they were in the open.

"We're off, Steve," shouted Phil, as they passed their friend.

"So are we," said Steve, as he threw a saddle onto his horse's back. "But you've got a big advantage over us. Go to it, though, we'll all be rooting for you. I only wish I were going with you."

The boys wheeled the "Arrow" out of the rude shed that had been constructed for it. They had no need to make an inspection, for they had been over everything the previous afternoon, and knew that everything was as it should be. Phil and Tom leaped into their places, Dick spun the propeller, and as the engine took hold, leaped to one side and scrambled aboard as the plane began to gather headway. Amid the cheers of the Rangers they roared along the ground and then soared swiftly aloft to begin the most exciting flight they had ever known.

They climbed steadily, holding a southerly course as Captain Bradley had directed. Far away they could see a blotch of smoke, and they headed for this, rightly conjecturing that it marked the site of the raided town. Phil opened the throttle, and the "Arrow" sped with breath-taking speed through the crisp morning air.

In a few minutes they had covered the distance that it would have taken a horse

hours to traverse. Arrived over the town, they could see the hills in the distance toward which the raiders were probably at that moment travelling. They could make out a deep cleft between two mountains, and Phil decided to head toward that, as it was probably a pass through which the Mexicans would have to go.

Phil let the "Arrow" out at full speed, and at the same time swooped earthward, the better to see objects on the ground. The brown desert had given way to green vegetation, and still they had seen no sign of the raiders, when Tom, who was scanning the earth through a strong pair of field glasses, uttered a cry.

"There they are, Phil," he shouted, "Bear a little to the right, and we'll soon be right over them."

Phil shifted his lateral controls, and in a few moments he and Dick could see the column of raiders without the aid of glasses. The raiders saw them, too, and there were wild shouts and gesticulations in the cavalcade as the boys swooped down close to it. They could plainly see the two girls, who were mounted on two mules. The girls realized that the areoplane must contain their countrymen, and stretched up imploring arms toward it. But it would have been mad-

ness for the boys to attempt a rescue in broad daylight against such overwhelming numbers, and they had to content themselves with keeping track of the cavalcade.

The bandits were panic stricken under this surveillance, and hastened their progress as much as possible, heading for the gap in the hills that the boys had previously noted. Toward evening the bandits passed through this gap, and laid their course for a tall mountain a few miles from it. Through the field glasses the boys could see them winding up a path, and finally saw them disappear in what seemed to be a big cave in the side of the mountain. Several remained outside evidently as sentries, and to deceive these, the boys turned about and headed north, toward Laguna, as though giving up the chase for the night.

But this was far from being their intention. After carefully locating the cave, the boys flew about ten miles, and then descended on a level place to eat supper and hold a council of war.

"My idea is this," said Phil. "Let's wait until after dark, and then fly to the foot of that mountain and land. I noticed a fine level place there, and I think I can find it again, even after dark. Then, we'll leave the plane there, and creep up to the camp. Once there,

we'll have to see how things look, and plan accordingly. We've got to get those poor girls away from them, some way or other."

"You bet," said Dick. "It certainly hurt to have to leave them this morning. I guess we're about their last chance, for they can expect no mercy from Espato."

Night descended quickly, and after a hasty inspection of their firearms the boys climbed aboard the "Arrow", and started on their mission of rescue.

CHAPTER XI

Desperate Chances

They flew slowly, so as to make as little noise as possible, but it was not long before they spied several twinkling camp-fires shining against the black background of the mountain. The bandits were drinking and carousing, and, having convinced themselves that the aeroplane had returned to civilization, they were not keeping much of a lookout. A brisk breeze was whistling through the pine trees, and this, together with the noise of their revelry effectually prevented them from hearing the exhaust of the aeroplane.

Taking no chances, Phil shut off the motor while they were still some distance away, and volplaned silently down. When they were close to the ground, and below the level of the cave, Dick switched on their powerful searchlight, and with its aid they made a safe though bumpy landing.

And now the time had come for utmost caution. They were on the enemy's ground,

and capture would mean not only their own deaths but those of the two girls as well.

Silently as shadows the three friends climbed up the steep slope of the mountain, guided by the distant flicker of the camp fires through the trees. Soon they had reached a place where, peering through a screen of trees and underbrush, they commanded a full view of the Mexicans' encampment.

The black mouth of a giant cave yawned against the side of the mountain, and in front of this was a broad level space, on which grew a few straggling trees. The clearing was bounded on all sides by dense forest, and afforded an excellent hiding place for evil-doers.

Three great fires roared and crackled in this clearing, and about these the bandits sprawled, some eating, others drinking, gesticulating and swearing. The Radio Boys looked anxiously for the two girls, and were not long in discovering them. The Mexicans had bound them to the largest of the trees growing in the clearing, so tightly that they could not move hand or foot. They were in the full glare of the fire, so that the boys had to bide their time until the bandits should tire of their carousal and go to sleep, allowing the fires to die down.

About ten o'clock the moon arose and this

added to the boys' difficulties, for as it climbed higher in the heavens it lit up the whole landscape, making it almost as light as day and rendering concealment difficult.

With what patience they could muster, the boys waited for the raiders to quiet down. At last, rendered unconscious by their potations, the bandits one after another dropped into drunken slumber. The fires died down, and now the time for action had arrived.

Between the forest and the trees to which the two girls were bound there lay a clear space some thirty feet wide, and to cross this meant to run a fearful risk of detection. Fortunately, however, the moon was obscured at intervals by clouds scudding before it, and the boys waited until the dark shadow of a cloud crept over the clearing, and then crept silently forth from their concealment.

A low moan came from the tree where the girls were tied, not one of the bandits having taken the thought or trouble to loosen their bonds. Phil drew his sharp hunting knife in readiness to cut the ropes that held them, but the three boys had hardly crossed half the open space before the moon began to emerge from behind the cloud.

"Lie down, fellows, quick!" hissed Phil, and threw himself flat on the ground. The

others did likewise, but had one of the Mexicans wakened at that time, they would certainly have been discovered. Fortunately, the raiders were so intoxicated that even the sentry had fallen into a heavy drunken stupor. The boys lay tense, ready at the first alarm to rush to the girls, cut their bonds, and then dash for the aeroplane. But as yet they were undiscovered, and after what seemed an age of waiting, another cloud crept over the moon.

Scarcely had its shadow encompassed them, than the boys were on their feet, gliding toward the unfortunate captives. The girls did not know of their presence until they felt their bonds fall away as keen-edged knives undid the Mexicans' brutal work.

"Don't cry out," whispered Phil. "We are friends, and are here to get you away."

The poor girls were so exhausted that when their bonds fell away they sank to the ground, almost incapable of movement. This was something the boys had not foreseen, but this was no time for hesitation. Phil glanced up toward the moon, and saw that the cloud was already beginning to thin and shred away.

"You take one, Dick, and I'll take the other," whispered Phil, "you go ahead, Tom, and break a path for us through the woods."

Stooping, he took one of the exhausted

girls in his arms, and made for the concealment of the forest, closely followed by Dick with the other girl.

Before they could reach the friendly shelter of the trees, however, one of the bandits turned over restlessly, sat up, and rubbed his eyes. The vacant look turned to one of surprise as he caught sight of the Americans, who were quite close to him. He sprang to his feet, but before he could utter a cry of warning Tom leaped at him like a panther, and struck him a stunning blow with the butt of his revolver. The man sank to the ground, and Tom hastened after the others, who by now had reached the welcome shadows of the forest.

Here progress was slow. Branches and creepers tore at and clung to them, but they kept doggedly on, spurred on by the knowledge that the man whom Tom had felled might regain consciousness at any moment and give the alarm. They had covered about half the distance to the plane, when there was a wild shout from the raiders' camp, and a bullet whizzed through the branches above them. Other voices took up the cry, and soon the boys could hear men crashing through the forest behind them.

Roused by the sounds of pursuit, the girls regained some of their strength, and insisted

that they could run, so the boys set them down. They were still weak, but struggled bravely down the steep mountain-side, assisted by the boys. Progress was slow, though, and they realized that their pursuers were gaining.

"Wait!" commanded Phil, as bullets began whistling uncomfortably close. "We'll give them a taste of their own medicine." He drew his revolver, as did the others, and they emptied them in the direction of the pursuing Mexicans. Yells and cries of pain came from the raiders, and the boys knew that their bullets had found a mark. The pursuers hesitated, and taking advantage of this momentary respite, the boys plunged forward again.

They knew that they must be close to their plane by this time, but now the bandits, only momentarily checked, had resumed the pursuit, urged on by the cries of their leader. By the time the little party reached the plane, the Mexicans were close at their heels, and had they not been such poor marksmen the Americans would have had little chance of escape. Bullets clipped the bushes on every side of them, for the moon lit up the clearing where they had left the plane so that it was almost as bright as day.

Phil and Dick caught up the girls, and

raced across the clearing to the plane. They had barely reached it, when the bandits came swarming out of the forest, yelling and cursing.

"Quick, fellows!" exclaimed Phil, "Spin the propeller, Tom, and you get the girls in, Dick. If the engine balks, we're done for."

But in this time of deadly peril the aeroplane responded nobly. At the first whirl of the propeller the engine took hold with a roar, and Tom leaped for the fuselage as the aeroplane started to move. The Mexicans were daunted a moment by the noise of the engine, but then, urged on by their leader, they rushed forward again.

The aeroplane was headed toward them, gathering speed with every turn of the powerful propeller. The bandits scattered to either side, but as the aeroplane left the ground, one, more courageous than his companions, leaped for the fuselage. He knew nothing of that powerful propeller, backed up by the might of six roaring cylinders. As he leaped the whirling blades caught him fair, and sheared his head from his shoulders.

The shock was hardly felt in the plane, but Phil glanced over the side, and as he saw the headless trunk drop to the ground, he shuddered. He knew that the rascal deserved his fate, however, and wasted little

sympathy on him. Other things occupied his mind, for they were still in danger, as the bandits fired a fusillade after them, some of the bullets even tearing through the wings. But the powerful machine was ascending at the rate of seven hundred feet a minute, and they were soon far beyond the reach of their baffled enemies.

Phil switched on the little lights over the instruments, and when he had attained a height of a thousand feet, set out for the Ranger's camp at a speed of ninety miles an hour.

"You'd better send them a radio that we're coming," yelled Phil to Dick, "it will help us to land if they show some flares."

"All right," nodded Dick, and started clicking at his key. He knew that Steve would probably be at his instrument, waiting for some news from them, nor was he mistaken. Hardly had he finished sending Steve's call when he got a reply, and then for fifteen minutes the man on the ground and the one a thousand feet up in the dark night exchanged questions and answers almost as readily as though they had both been seated in the same room.

CHAPTER XII

From Savage Clutches

"Steve says he'll set some flares right away," shouted Dick in Phil's ear, and the latter nodded.

"We ought to be pretty nearly there," he said, and had hardly ceased speaking when several bright lights flamed out from the darkness almost directly below them.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Phil, "we pretty near ran past our station that time. It's a good thing that Steve was on the job."

He shut off the engine, and started down in narrowing circles. Now that they could make themselves heard, the two girls started to pour out their gratitude to their rescuers, but before the embarrassed boys could answer they were going down so fast that conversation ceased for the time being. The girls gripped wildly at the sides of the car, and screamed as the wheels bumped the ground.

In a second the aeroplane was surrounded by excited Rangers, who lifted the girls out, and hoisted the Radio Boys joyously onto

broad shoulders. It was a real triumphal procession that marched back to headquarters, where Captain Bradley awaited them.

"Boys, you've certainly proved that you can deliver the goods," he exclaimed, his usual reserve cast to the winds in the excitement of the moment. "And how are your pretty passengers?" he added, as the two girls were ushered in by admiring but somewhat bashful Rangers.

"Thanks to these young men and their aeroplane, we are all right," answered the elder of the two, Alice Brady. "They snatched us right out from under the noses of the Mexicans, when we had given up all hope of ever getting away from them."

"Tell us about it," directed the Captain, "I know I'd never get half the story from Strong and his friends. They're too modest."

"Oh, we just did what we were sent to do," muttered Phil, uncomfortably; "any of the rest of the bunch would have done the same thing if they'd been in our places."

"You keep quiet," ordered the Captain, with twinkling eyes, "let the young ladies have their say."

The young ladies had their say, and painted their rescue in glowing colors. When they had finished, Captain Bradley nodded.

"I guess I sent the right men for the job,

all right," he remarked. "You couldn't have done better, and the Rangers are proud of you."

And the boys soon found that this was no idle phrase. The Rangers were proud of them, and were not backward in letting them know it. The Radio Boys had won a secure place for themselves in the esteem of these daring frontiersmen, which further acquaintance only served to strengthen.

The Rangers took an added interest in the "Arrow" from that time on, and whenever the boys were working on it, they always had an interested audience. After their return with the two girls they had had considerable trouble patching the wings, where they had been torn by the Mexicans' bullets, but at last succeeded in getting everything in fine shape again.

"Them Greasers is sure poor shots," commented Dan, as he viewed the aeroplane critically the day after the boys' triumphant return. "Ef they'd been anyway decent shots, they'd sure have drilled a hole or two in that thar gasoline tank, and then you'd have been out o' luck."

"You can bet we were thinking of that all the time we were going up," grinned Phil. "It was pretty dark, though, and we were moving kind of fast."

"I've got to admit I didn't take a heap of stock in what that machine could do, when you fellers first landed here," observed Chip, who was cleaning and oiling his revolvers. "I gotta take off my lid to it now, though. Looks to me as though I'd orter sell my cayuse now, and rustle me one of them aryplanes."

"Huh!" snorted Dan, "you'd bust the critter clean to bits the fust time you tried to land it. We'd have to collect your remnants with a broom an' shovel."

"I reckon you think you'd jest have to step in an' say 'giddap' to it, an' it would up an' fly like that there flyin' horse that the college sharp was tellin' us about one time," retorted Chip. "I might have a chance to learn how, but you're too old to learn them new tricks, Dan."

"Mebbe so, mebbe so," said the other. "I'll stick to my pinto awhile yet, anyways. He spied a rattlesnake the other day, and blamed if he didn't jump almost as high as that machine kin fly. That pony could give points to a jack rabbit when it comes to jumpin'."

"Some day I'll take you up for a flight, Dan, if you think you'd like to try it," offered Phil.

"Nary flight, thanks just the same," said Dan, shaking his grizzled head. "I'll stick to hosses awhile yet, when I want to go any-

where. They ain't as fast, but still I've got a pretty good idea what they're goin' to do next, and I wouldn't have in that aryplane."

"Go on, Dan, take a chance," urged Steve, a mischievous light in his eyes, "You can't any more than get killed, anyway."

But the old plainsman was obdurate, and could never be persuaded to set foot in the machine. But there was no lack of passengers, nevertheless, for most of the men were only too glad to take a trial flight when opportunity offered.

In the meantime, the Mexicans continued to give trouble at different places along the border, although more than once the boys, patroling in their machine, detected raiding bands and gave warning in neighboring towns so that the raiders' reception was considerably warmer than they had anticipated. A number had been captured, and from them it was learned that the Radio Boys had incurred the undying hatred of Espato and his band, who had sworn to kill them.

"Threatened people live long," quoted Phil, when he heard of this.

"You said it," agreed Dick. "I never thought that Espato would love us for what we did to his gang."

"They'd probably kill anybody they got hold of, whether he'd ever done anything to

them or not," observed Tom. "I guess with the help of the old 'Arrow' we can do him more harm than he can us, anyway."

When this conversation took place, the boys were gathered in Steve's radio shack, whither they had repaired with the intention of trying to get in touch with Dr. Denby at Castleton.

"My set is no great shakes," apologized Steve, "but under favorable conditions, I think we can reach your town, all right. It did once, you'll remember."

"I'll have a try at it, anyway, if you don't mind," said Phil, and seated himself at the key.

B-z-z-z, whir-r went the motor-generator, as its first low hum mounted in tone to a strident whine, and the blue sparks crackled from the aerial. Time and again Phil called Dr. Denby's signal, but it was not until he was almost ready to give up in despair that he at last got an answer in the earphones.

CHAPTER XIII

Gun Play

"Good!" exclaimed Phil, as he recognized Doctor Denby's sending. For some time he and the Doctor exchanged news, and while Dick and Tom and Steve waited with what patience they could muster to learn what it was all about. At last Phil swung away from the key, took the head set from his ears, and mopped at a perspiring brow.

"Whew!" he exclaimed, as he switched off the generator, "that's pretty hot work for a night like this. I wish I could jump into a nice cold bathtub right now."

"If you'd talked there much longer, we'd have hunted one up an' thrown you in," said Dick. "What's all the news from home, anyway?"

"Why, they don't seem to be any nearer to getting the $40,000 back than they were when we left," said Phil, ignoring Dick's threat. "Mr. Denby says that 'Rocks' Gurney left town day before yesterday, and nobody seems to know where he's disappeared to."

"Left town, eh?" said Tom, thoughtfully. "I wonder where he's bound for."

"Probably thought it would be safer to light out before somebody arrested him on suspicion," suggested Dick.

"He'll get his some day, though," remarked Steve. "There are plenty of bad men in this part of the country that get away with murder for a while, but they generally get theirs in the end."

"It doesn't always work that way, though," said Dick, with mock seriousness. "Look at the fierce jokes that Tom has gotten away with, and he seems to be as far from punishment as ever."

"Oh, it's punishment enough to have to tell good jokes to an unappreciative gink like you," retorted Tom. "You wouldn't know a good joke if it came up and shook hands with you."

"Maybe not," agreed Dick, "I hear so few good ones, that I can't say I'm an expert at recognizing them."

"How about that one I told you the other day, about the Irishman that fell off the scaffold?" asked Tom, in an injured tone. "Didn't you even like that one?"

"Well, it wasn't so bad," conceded Dick. "It was a little better than most of them, anyway."

"Tell it again, and I'll be umpire," laughed Steve. "I'm willing to take a chance on anything once."

"Well, it seems this Irishman was standing on a scaffolding, laying bricks," commenced Tom, "and while thinking of something else he stepped back a little too far, and fell off. He landed with an awful thud, and a friend who happened to be near ran to his assistance.

" 'Mike, me poor bye, are yez dead?' he asked.

"Mike's eyelids fluttered. 'Oi am,' he said.

" 'Shure, and Oi think you're lyin,' said Pat.

" 'That proves Oi'm dead,' says Mike, 'fer if Oi wuz alive, you'd be scared to call me a liar.' "

The boys could not help laughing, and Steve expressed his belief that the story was O. K.

"I don't think your jokes are half as bad as these two Indians say they are," declared Steve.

"They couldn't be half as bad as that," said Tom, laughing ruefully. "They'd be terrible jokes if they were."

"Well, you can try it on the rest of the gang, if you want to take a chance," said Steve. "You've got to be mighty sure a joke's

good, though, before you spring it on them. They're all pretty handy with a six-shooter, you know."

"I'll risk it," said Tom, "let's go over to the bunkhouse, and I'll give them all a treat."

While they were strolling over, Phil gave them all the other news that he had received from Doctor Denby. All the home folks were well, and Dick's father had so far recovered from the bullet wound as to have resumed his duties in the bank. The detectives who had been employed to catch the hold-up gang had been foiled at every turn, and now it seemed unlikely that the robbers would be captured and the money recovered. The Radio Boys, however, still believed that the man with the scar, whom Steve had noticed during the brush with the desperados, would prove to be the notorious Murray. If that were the case, and he were still in the Rangers' territory, the boys still had hopes of coming across him.

When the boys entered the bunkhouse, they were greeted heartily by all the Rangers who happened to be in the building.

"Here's somebody that's going to tell us some swell jokes, fellows," said Steve. "Light up your pipes and listen. He's got a large variety, and they're all good."

Shouts of approbation greeted this an-

nouncement, and for once in his life Tom found what he had longed for so often—an appreciative audience. Without having to be coaxed too much, he told about all the jokes he could think of, and they were all rewarded with laughter and applause.

When he had at last reached the end of his stock of humorous anecdotes he was voted the best story teller in camp.

"I'd ruther listen to them funny stories of yourn than any of those vaudeville sharps I've heard in town," remarked Dan. "Most o' them are about as funny as a funeral bell."

"Well, I'm glad you liked my jokes," said Tom, with a meaning glance at Dick and Phil. "Some people are so pig-headed that they won't admit a story is funny just on principle."

"I guess you haven't been to many shows, have you, Dan?" asked Phil.

"Huh!" snorted the old plainsman. "They're all fakes, anyhow. I rec'lect one I went to, where the feller was supposed to shoot at the keys of a piano and play a tune on it. Waal, it seems this feller had a partner, and he'd stay behind the scenes and play each note hisself, while the feller out in front with the gun was only firin' off blanks. This yere plan worked perfect for a while, but then these short horns had some kind of a fallin'

out, and the feller that hit the notes on the piano decides to double-cross his pal. Which this happens the same night I sees this show in Tucson.

"Waal, at first everything goes off accordin' to Hoyle, and the sharp with the gun plays the tune on the piano as usual. But when he stops shootin', the piano kep' on playin' jest the same. It was real funny at first, but after a while some of the boys gets kind of peevish at the way they've been took in right along."

"What happened then?" asked Phil, as Dan stopped to light his pipe.

"Waal, a whole lot happened pretty pronto," replied the other. "Fust thing you know, some impulsive maverick near the front of the theatre pulls his six-gun, an' 'lows he'll try his hand at playin' a tune on the piano. This seems to be a good idea to lots o' the others, and they tries long and earnest to get a tune out o' that unfortunate instrooment, but by the time they gets through they ain't much left of it but splinters. Howsumever, we all figgered that the show had been wuth the price o' admission, and we filed out contented an' happy."

"It must have been a nice pleasant evening," said Steve, laughing with the others. "How many people were killed, Dan?"

"Nary one," replied that individual, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. "When the first gun went off, most of the audience that ain't carryin' armament ducks under the seats, and stays there snug an' quiet until the gun play is over. But it's gettin' kind o' late, an' I'm goin' to pound my ear. You mavericks kin stay up all night if you wants to, but not for me."

"I guess we'd better all turn in," said Phil, as there was a general move toward retirement. "We've got to go on a long flight tomorrow, you know, so it won't hurt us to get a good night's sleep."

The Radio Boys were up at dawn the next morning, giving the "Arrow" a last inspection before starting. Captain Bradley had directed them to fly some hundred miles into the interior in order to discover, if possible, the hiding place of Espato's band. It was a mission fraught with peril, and the boys realized the seriousness of their commission.

CHAPTER XIV

Aerial Scouting

"I guess we're all set," said Phil, after giving one last twist to a turnbuckle. "The machine is in first class shape, and we ought to make the trip without any trouble. How is the radio outfit, Dick? Seem to be working all right?"

"Fine as silk," answered his friend. "This set is a pippin, Phil, let me tell you. It may be small, but it certainly can deliver the goods."

"Well, that's what we want," nodded Phil. "I guess we didn't make any mistake when we bought it. It came rather high, but a set like that is cheap at any price."

"I'll say it is," agreed Tom, as he climbed into his seat. "Our lives are apt to depend on that set more than once before we get through."

Phil nodded, and climbed into the pilot's seat. Dick gave the big propeller a spin, and amid the cheers of the Rangers who happened to be off duty and had gathered to see

them start, they shot up into the sun-drenched atmosphere.

It was a glorious day for flying. The air was clear as crystal, and the boys had a view of the surrounding country that was nothing short of magnificent. Below them stretched and wound the silver ribbon of the Rio Grande, while far in the distance they could see the shimmer and glint of the Gulf of Mexico.

The exhilaration of flight went to their heads like wine, and as they swooped through the bracing air they shouted and sang, oblivious of the perils that in all probability awaited them. They were young and life was sweet, and the prospect of danger and adventure was a thing to be welcomed rather than dreaded.

Dick and Tom took turns at the wireless apparatus, keeping in touch with Steve and the camp as long as possible. But gradually the signals became fainter and fainter, and before long they were beyond their sending range, although they could still hear Steve.

"Can't hear you any more," clicked Steve, at length. "I'll go and report to Captain Bradley. So long, and good luck."

Now Dick and Tom exchanged their headsets for powerful field glasses, and swept the country below them for any sign of Espato

and his band. They flew first to the cave from which they had rescued the two girls, but there was no sign of life about it, and indeed, they had hardly expected to find any, for the wily bandit would not be likely to use that place again after he knew that its location was known to the Americans.

However, the boys had the advantage of knowing that the bandit's main stronghold was probably on the continuation of a line drawn from Laguna to the scene of the rescue, as the Mexicans had travelled in that direction continually after leaving American soil.

"Let's land here and see what that cave looks like inside," shouted Phil, and as this suited the others, too, he pointed the nose of the aeroplane downward, and they made a landing on the level plateau in front of the cave.

"Suppose you stay with the machine, Dick, and keep a sharp lookout, while Tom and I look around inside," said Phil. "It might be a good idea to keep the engine running, so that we can make a quick getaway if we have to."

"Well, just as you say," agreed Dick, a little reluctantly. "It's right enough that somebody should stay outside with the machine, though."

Phil left the motor turning over slowly,

and he and Tom, with revolver in one hand and little electric flashlight in the other, stepped warily from the brilliant sunshine outside to the damp gloom of the big cave.

But they found little to reward them for their trouble. The floor of the cave was littered with old cans and broken cooking utensils, and bore other signs of having been used extensively by the bandits. There was nothing to give the boys a clue to the whereabouts of the main stronghold, however, and at last they emerged blinking into the sunshine, disappointed at the fruitless result of their search.

"How about it?" inquired Dick, eagerly, as they emerged. "What is it like in there, anyway?"

"Not worth the trouble of going in," said Phil, disgustedly. "It's a fine big cave, though, and I suppose Espato is mighty sore because we discovered it."

"Well, I'm glad I stayed out here, then," said Dick. "The propellor is better than an electric fan to keep a fellow cool on a hot day."

"Oh, well, I didn't really expect to find much here," said Phil. "I suppose we might as well get going again. As long as you're in the pilot's seat, Dick, you might as well steer the old ship awhile. I'd like to sit back and

loaf for a while, the way you and Tom usually do."

"Huh!" snorted Tom, "whose fault is that, I'd like to know. We'd drive all the time, if we got the chance."

"Yes, but then you wouldn't have time to think up those swell jokes of yours, and think of what a loss that would be to everybody," grinned Phil.

"It would be pretty tough on the world, I'll admit," said Tom. "I suppose I really should never have joined the Rangers. If you or Dick gets killed, it doesn't matter, but if I do, it will be a big loss to humanity."

"Oh, I guess humanity would manage to stagger along some way, even without the joy of hearing your jokes," said Dick. "The world got along fairly well before you came romping around with that phoney brand of humor, you know."

"Yes, but then people didn't know what they were missing," said Tom, modestly.

"If they had known, wouldn't they have been thankful?" retorted Dick, and before Tom could think of a suitable retort, he had opened the throttle, and the "Arrow" was once more soaring high above the green earth.

They flew in great sweeping circles, raking the hills and valleys below with their

powerful fieldglasses, but saw nothing that would indicate the presence of the bandit stronghold. Noon came, and the boys decided to land, have lunch, and let the motor cool off awhile.

They landed in a grassy meadow, close to the edge of a forest of stunted trees. At the edge of the woodland flowed a little brook of clear cold water, and Phil and Tom agreed that Dick was a good picker of locations.

"There are plenty of big logs lying around to lean against, anyway," said Dick. "There must have been a bad windstorm to knock so many trees down."

"It's queer, though, that they're so much larger than any of the trees growing around here," said Phil. "They feel mighty hard, too."

He drew his hunting knife and tested the surface of the prostrate cylinders, but instead of its sinking into soft wood, it gave the gritty sound of steel scraping against stone.

"What the dickens is it, anyway?" asked Tom, in surprise. "It sounds like stone, but I'll be blamed if I ever saw a rock that shape before. It looks like a big stone column."

"It looks so much like one, that I think it is one," said Phil.

"But how can it be?" protested Dick. "We're in the heart of a wilderness here.

Who'd drop a load of stone pillars down here, I'd like to know."

"I'd like to know, too, and I propose that we investigate," said Phil, scraping at the thick coating of moss that covered one of the columns. "Look here!" he exclaimed, a moment later. "Call me a Chinaman, if there aren't carvings on this stone. Look here, fellows," and the excited boys bent over the pillar, on which were carved characters and symbols of various kinds.

"That's writing, all right, but whoever chipped that out, certainly didn't understand English," said Tom. "I can't make out a word of it."

"Oh, quit your fooling and be serious for once," exclaimed Phil. "It looks to me as though we had discovered something big. You know that a few centuries ago the Aztecs had big cities and buildings, and we may have stumbled on the ruins of one. Let's get a bite of lunch, and then we'll go on an exploring expedition."

The boys were almost too excited to eat, and it was not long before they were ready to test the truth of Phil's theory.

The fallen pillars were thicker in the vicinity of the woods, and from this they inferred that if there actually was an old Aztec city

here it must be among the trees, which had sprung up around the ancient buildings.

Accordingly, they entered the forest, climbing over fallen pillars and mounds of broken stones. They had struggled through the tangled vines and creepers only a little way, when they all stopped with exclamations of astonishment, and gazed wide-eyed at an imposing ruin that reared its huge bulk in their path.

CHAPTER XV

Menace of the Cave

Rows of big columns supported a carved and decorated portico, which, while it had crumbled away and fallen in many places, still showed enough of its original grandeur to convince the boys that it had been erected by craftsmen of no mean ability. Trees had sprouted and flourished in what had once been the temple sacred to the God of Fire. Great vines and creepers writhed and twisted about the columns, some of which had ceased to be supports for the vines, but were in reality kept by them from falling.

In the center of the ruined facade was a huge arch giving access to the interior. Black and mysterious it looked against the brightness outside, as though inviting the boys to explore its ancient secrets, but at the same time suggesting an indefinable menace to whoever should dare to profane its sacred precincts.

The boys felt a sense of impending peril, as though some unseen but hostile presence

were hovering over the place, menacing the unwary human who might presume to probe into the hidden secrets of the ancient pile. But the boys were not to be easily deterred by vague premonitions, and they were determined to explore the ruins.

"Come on, fellows," exclaimed Phil, after a short period of astonished silence. "Let's go in and see what this place looks like. There's no telling what we may find inside."

"We may find more than we bargain for," muttered Tom, with an involuntary shudder, as the boys climbed over fallen pillars and entered the black doorway. A close, musty air filled the place, and for a few moments the boys had to stop and accustom their eyes to the gloom within. In places the roof had fallen in, but these openings were so overgrown by vegetation that they did little to dispel the gloom.

The beams from their flashlights seemed lost in the vast place, but as their eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness, they could make out a huge object looming at the further end of the temple. Stepping cautiously over the rough and broken floor, the boys approached this, and found it to be a big idol, skillfully carved from a single huge block of granite.

As Phil played his flashlight over the hideous countenance of the image, the boys gave a cry and started back, for two glowing red eyes seemed gazing balefully down at these presumptious invaders of age long quiet.

"What was that, Phil?" asked Tom, in a voice that shook a little in spite of himself.

"I think there must be two jewels set into the idol's head as eyes," said Phil, as he flashed his light once more on the face of the image, and the baleful eyes flamed and glowed. "They look rather scarey, don't they? I don't think that fellow is very glad to have us visit him."

"But if those are real jewels, they must be worth a fortune," said Dick, excitedly. "Why not take them back with us?"

"Gosh, leave them alone," protested Tom. "Let's look around first, anyway. I've got a hunch that no good would come from monkeying with that idol."

"Well, I'm going to have a try at them on the way out, hunch or no hunch," declared Dick. "But look, fellows. This must have been an altar, or something of the kind."

"It looks like one," said Tom, as all three boys played their lights on the object in question. "But what are all those streaks down the side, I wonder."

"Can't you guess?" asked Phil, in a curi-

ous voice. "Those are bloodstains, Tom, in all probability. One of the favorite indoor sports of the Aztecs was offering up sacrifices to their gods."

"I'll bet you're right!" exclaimed Dick. "And I remember reading that they didn't stop at animals, either. Humans were the favorites, weren't they, Phil?"

"I think so," nodded Phil. "But let's see what else we can find."

The boys left the giant statue brooding in the gloom, and circled the interior. At one point they found an opening leading into another, smaller temple, in which was an altar elaborately carved with figures of men and beasts. At the back of this altar the flooring had broken away, and, peering into this opening, the boys could see a flight of rough stone steps leading downward.

Phil looked questioningly at the others, and they both nodded. Without further hesitation, Phil started down the steps, which had deep hollows worn in them by feet that had been dust for centuries. The steps went down steeply for perhaps twenty feet, and then the boys found themselves standing at the entrance to a dark tunnel, from which issued a strong draught of cold, damp air.

Starting down this, they soon found that the walls widened out, the roof sloped up-

ward, and expanded into a big cave. The walls of this cave had numerous ledges projecting from them, and on these ledges were ranged rows of stone caskets. The boys surmised, and rightly, that this was the burial vault of the priests who had officiated in the temple above. A heavy dust lay thick over everything, and when the boys spoke, it was in hushed tones.

At the further side of the cave a door opened onto another tunnel, and after the boys had traversed this a short distance they found that the main passageway branched out into others, which in turn were subdivided. They kept on for a time, but at length Phil called a halt.

"We don't seem to be getting anywhere, and if we're not careful we stand a fine chance of getting lost," he said. "I think we'd better start back."

"So do I," said Dick. "We'd better be careful of our flashlights, too. The battery in mine is beginning to get a little weak."

"Mine isn't any too good, either," said Tom.

"I put a new battery in mine yesterday, so it's all right yet," said Phil. "We'll just use mine, and you can both save yours for emergencies. They'll recuperate if you don't use them for a little while."

Phil had taken careful note of their direction, and was making his way unerringly through the many twists and turns of the underground passage, when suddenly he was halted by an exclamation from Dick.

"Just a minute, Phil," he said, excitedly. "Where's Tom?"

"Tom, echoed Phil. "How do I know? I thought he was right in back of you."

"So he was, up to a minute ago," said Dick. "He stopped for a moment to tie his shoe, and I thought he'd catch right up to us. Flash your light back, and see if we can locate him."

But there was no sign of Tom, and when his friends shouted his name they received no answer but a hollow echo that came reverberating out of the dim reaches of the tunnel.

Phil and Dick gazed at each other in consternation.

"We passed a fork just a little way back," said Dick. "He must have taken the wrong turning."

"Let's go back, then, quick!" exclaimed Phil, and the two boys raced back to the point where the subterranean passage forked. They raced down the second tunnel, only to find that, after a short distance, that also forked into three branches.

Here the boys halted, dark forebodings clutching at their hearts.

Phil drew his revolver, and fired twice into the air. The noise of the reports almost deafened them, the sound caroming from the narrow walls and echoing away down the complicated passages.

The boys listened for some answering sound from their missing comrade, and their hearts leaped as they heard a muffled explosion in the distance.

"Thank heaven," exclaimed Phil, fervently, and forgetful for the moment of caution, he and Dick hastened in the direction from which the shot had seemed to come. Phil fired again, and this time the answering report was much nearer. At last, turning a corner, they caught sight of Tom's flashlight, burning dimly through the darkness.

"Hurray!" yelled Phil and Dick, and were answered by a welcoming shout from Tom. The friends raced toward each other, and in a few moments were laughing and pounding each other joyously.

Tom, it turned out, had stopped to struggle with a refractory shoelace, and when he had finally got it fixed had run after his two friends, expecting to catch up with them at once. When he saw no sign of them, however, he knew that he must have taken a

wrong turn, and had about given himself up for lost when he heard the distant report of Phil's revolver.

"Well, let's get out of this, quick," said Phil, when Tom had finished. "This place is hoodooed, and the sooner we're out in the sunshine again the better I'll like it."

But this was not so easily to be accomplished. While searching for Tom, the others had been so anxious over him that they had failed to take careful note of their route, and now, after half an hour of wandering in the endless passages, they were forced to admit that they were hopelessly lost.

CHAPTER XVI

The Race for Life

When this fact became apparent to them, they stopped and held a council.

"Fellows, we seem to be in a pretty bad fix," said Phil. "If you have any ideas for getting out, now's the time to say so."

"Search me," said Tom, shaking his head. "All I can see is, to keep going and trust to luck to come out somewhere before we starve to death."

"Shucks!" exclaimed Phil, "that's no kind of an idea. Can't you think of anything better, Dick?"

"Well, I don't know," returned his friend, slowly. "I've noticed there's a slight draught through these passages, and it must come from some opening into the outer world. I think that if, at every fork, we turn in the direction that the wind is coming from, that we may land out somewhere. How does that strike you?"

"I was thinking the same thing," nodded Phil. "We were careless to get in this fix

without having anything with us to eat. I'm half starved already."

"I'm about nine-tenths starved," lamented Tom. "I was never so hungry in my life."

They started on again, following Dick's suggestion. At some of the forks, however, they found that a draught blew up every one, so that they were no better off than before. The air was dark and chilly, too, and in spite of the exercise they were chilled to the bone. They kept doggedly on, but were almost ready to give up hope, when Phil stopped and listened.

Far away in the depths of the black passageway they could hear a faint murmur, like the sound of running water. They pressed onward, the sound growing ever louder as they went. Soon the murmur had grown to a roar that filled their ears, and made it impossible for them to hear each other's voices.

Two of their three flashlights were useless, the batteries being completely exhausted. The third gave only a dim light, that seemed only to accentuate the darkness through which they groped. It sufficed, however, to show them the cause of the roar that echoed through the subterranean caverns.

Their passage opened out into a vast cave. From a point near the roof of this a great

waterfall thundered down a wall of glistening black rock, and then swirled away in a rushing torrent.

The boys gazed awe-struck at this mighty spectacle, drenched by the spray that seemed to fill the vast cavern. As he gazed, a desperate plan took form in Phil's mind, and he lost no time in communicating it to the others.

He pointed to the rushing river, and started removing his coat and shoes. The others divined his purpose, and with a reckless light in their eyes they followed suit.

They had heard of underground rivers, and knew that they nearly always come out into the open at some point. They were all good swimmers, and preferred to trust to the river rather than waste their strength in aimless gropings through the endless subterranean tunnels. But it required the highest kind of courage to plunge into the black and raging torrent, knowing that the chances were all against them.

Phil was the first to take the plunge, closely followed by the others. The roaring flood caught avidly at them, like some ferocious monster seizing his prey. They were whirled away like chips on the surface of the torrent, caught up in eddies, drawn under the surface, battered and buffeted, but always

fighting gamely for life against overwhelming odds. The river flowed deep and strong, and they were carried at tremendous speed for what seemed an infinite lapse of time. In the black darkness, no one knew what had become of the others, but each one struggled valiantly against the mighty torrent that was beating the life from him.

At last, far away, they caught a glimpse of daylight, and the sight put renewed strength into their tired muscles. Buffeted about on the torrent, they shot out from black gloom into the glorious light of the setting sun. By some miracle, they were all close together, and they started then to work across the stream toward the bank. After the river emerged from the mountain, it broadened out and slowed down somewhat, so that it was not long before the three comrades reached the bank, and dragged themselves out onto a gravelly beach.

Chilled to the bone by the icy water, and exhausted by the struggle, they could hardly move at first, but soon their lusty youth asserted itself. Phil was the first to struggle to his feet, pale and dripping, but with a brave attempt at a smile nevertheless.

Dick and Tom sat up, and then got to their feet, and the three friends silently shook hands. Then they set out to locate the aero-

plane, as they knew it would soon be dark, and they had no desire to spend the night hungry and in their wet clothing.

But it took them longer to find the "Arrow" than they had anticipated. The place where the river emerged from the mountain was almost on the opposite side to that where they had left their machine, and it was only after nearly two hours of heartbreaking struggle through dense woods and underbrush that they finally came in sight of the white-winged airship. But almost at the same moment they caught sight of something else that whipped their flagging energies into instant action.

On a slight eminence about a mile distant were gathered a group of horsemen. They had caught sight of the airship, which was a conspicuous mark against the green background. They were pointing and gesticulating, and even as the boys watched them, headed their horses at a gallop in the direction of the airship.

The Radio Boys were several hundred yards from the Arrow at this time, and they fought their way silently and savagely through the dense underbrush. As they neared their machine, they could hear the Mexicans' horses crashing through the bushes and the cries and oaths of their riders.

Drenched with perspiration, their breath coming in great gasps, and all but exhausted, Phil hurled himself out into the clearing. Tom and Dick laboring close behind. Heads down, and traveling sheerly on will power, the boys sprinted for the machine.

"You fellows get her started," gasped Phil, "I'll stand them off until you get moving."

Dick waved his hand in token of understanding, and he and Tom leaped for the plane, Dick throwing himself into the control compartment, while Tom summoned up the last vestige of his waning strength to turn the propeller. The engine was cold, however, and it was not until the fourth time that it consented to start.

Meantime, Phil kept on until he had passed the plane and was between it and the oncoming Mexicans. Their leader had outdistanced the others, and Phil had barely passed the airship when this man dashed into the clearing. He was a squat, powerfully built man, and as he rode he spurred mercilessly at his horse. Some hundred paces behind him rode the rest of his band, shouting and cursing. Phil had only four cartridges left in his revolver, but as the leader, who was none other than the notorious Espato, broke into the clearing, Phil emptied his revolver

at him. The first shot went low, and the bandit's horse pitched to earth, hurling its rider headlong. But the Mexican was on his feet like a cat, and sprang at Phil.

The latter heard the roar of the engine, and a shout from Dick told him that the "Arrow" was moving. His revolver was empty, but as Espato sprang at him, Phil clutched the barrel, and brought the butt down on the bandit's head in a sweeping blow that cut his swarthy face to the bone.

The Mexican staggered back and slumped to the ground, and Phil, hurling the empty weapon at the oncoming horsemen, turned and ran like a deer after the "Arrow" which was gathering speed rapidly. As he neared it, Tom reached over the fuselage, and Phil made a flying leap just as the wheels left the ground. He caught Tom's arm, swayed dizzily in the air a moment, and then half climbed and was half dragged into Tom's compartment.

"The bomb, Tom, drop it!" gasped Phil.

The Mexicans had leaped from their horses, and were grouped below the aeroplane, unslinging their rifles in preparation for a volley. In obedience to Phil's command, Tom reached down and pressed a lever, releasing a small bomb containing a charge of high explosive.

Swift and sure as doom itself dropped this missile. It landed close to the group of bandits, and exploded with a terrific report.

The aeroplane rocked and pitched violently in the terrific uprush of air that followed. As the smoke cleared away the boys could see the surviving Mexicans rushing wildly in all directions, leaving several of their number where they had been thrown by the force of the explosion. Spent and well nigh exhausted, but victorious, the Radio Boys winged their way into the calm evening sky, and straightened out for the flight to camp.

CHAPTER XVII

A Perilous Mission

As though nature repented of being too generous in the matter of sunshiny days, there came a depressing period of rain and fog during which the plane lay idle and the boys fumed in their restlessness. Had it not been for radio they might have done something desperate in their quest for excitement. As it was, there was the never-ending fascination of snatching messages, some trivial, some amusing or romantic, some weighted with affairs of international importance, from the overcrowded ether. One of the chief charms of radio was its unexpectedness. One never knew when clapping the ear phones to expectant ears what new surprise might be in store.

And then, of course, there was always the music—good music for pleasant days, jazz for rainy weather. No matter how much they might become accustomed to the modern miracle, the thrill was never absent from the fact that, by merely turning a knob, one might

tune in upon any kind of amusement desired. Talk about the Arabian Nights—!

Steve was always tinkering with his receiving set and although his apparatus was remarkably efficient he never seemed quite satisfied with the results.

"I get just fine results from nearby stations," he was complaining on one of these rainy afternoons when the boys, bent earnestly over his set, were examining it minutely to see if they could suggest any improvements. "But when it comes to distance, in spite of the most careful tuning, and I've spent hours over it, I can't seem to catch a really clear message. And if a set isn't good for distance then, I ask you, what good is it, at all?" he added, standing off and viewing his handiwork with a rueful mixture of affection and disgust.

"Say," remarked Tom, glancing up at him with a grin, "I'd sure like to be in on the rumpus if any of **us** started to knock your apparatus."

"Yes, how do you get that way?" Dick wanted to know. "I've seldom seen a classier bit of mechanism."

Steve flushed at this whole-souled praise, but he still protested dissatisfaction with the results.

"It won't pick up messages at a distance—not clearly, that is," he persisted.

"There's nothing the matter with this set, old fellow," said Phil, thoughtfully. "You're getting the very best results possible with the receiving circuit you're using."

"The circuit I'm using," repeated Steve, mystified. "Why, I'm using the only one known."

"Till recently, yes," nodded Phil, while the others stopped tinkering and stared at him in surprised interest. "Didn't you read about that new contrivance that was demonstrated in New York, the other day?"

The boys shook their heads. They were still mystified, but their interest was unfeigned.

"Shoot," demanded Dick.

"If you know anything, spill it," added Tom with a grin.

"Oh, keep still and give the boy a chance," Steve demanded impatiently. "You mean there has been a new discovery, Phil?"

The latter nodded, his eyes kindling with interest in the subject.

"It's a new regenerative circuit," he explained. "From the account of it in the paper, it must be a pippin. I think they've dubbed it the 'Super Regenerative Circuit.'"

"Gee, that sounds like the right kind of

medicine for me," cried Steve joyfully. "Just what does this 'super' do?"

"We-el, I'm not overly clear on the subject, myself," said Phil. "But from the newspaper description of it, I reckon it just about does everything on the calendar, in the amplification line, that is. Armstrong claims that a message from a distant broadcasting station, so faint, as to be barely heard when the ordinary regenerative circuit is used, can, by the use of the 'super', be amplified so as to be heard distinctly in every part of a large room. Now, if you were to ask me, that's some classy amplification."

"I'll say so," agreed Dick, his keen mind already occupied with the possibilities of this new discovery. "Armstrong was the fellow who invented the present regenerative circuit, wasn't he?"

"Yes," said Phil, adding approvingly, "There's nothing slow about that boy."

"You said it," said Tom, with a sigh, "Wonder why we couldn't all have been born with brains like that."

"Speak for yourself, old timer," grinned Steve, adding, as he turned eagerly to Phil, "Such a circuit would sure solve my problem, Phil. But I suppose it would be harder to operate than the one we have."

"No, it isn't, that's just the beauty of it,"

said Phil, enthusiastically. "Armstrong declares it's easier of operation than the old regenerative circuit. He claims, too, that the invention will eventually do away with the outside aerial. In his demonstration, he used only a small loop."

"That sure would be a big advantage, too," said Dick. "The regular aerial surely has caused a great deal of trouble."

"I wonder," said Steve, a contemplative eye upon his set, "when I could get this wonder-working contrivance. It sure would be one joy to me."

"They will probably be in general use before long," suggested Phil, "and then you could either buy the apparatus or model one of your own on the same plan."

"Well, I suppose I'll just have to wait," admitted Steve grudgingly. So accustomed was he to modern miracles, that it seemed to him as though the apparatus he so ardently desired must be wafted to him on some magic Hertzian waves, to be delivered, ready for use, on the table before him!

After a while, since the weather showed no signs of clearing, and becoming tired of tinkering, the boys clapped on the head phones and prepared for an interesting hour or two of "listening in."

They listened to a bit of good music,

tuned in on a minstrel show, listened to some more or less interesting weather reports—they would have been more interesting, if they had been more hopeful—heard some distinctly uninteresting stock quotations and then, suddenly—a message in a familiar tone that made them sit up and stare at each other.

It was Doc. Denby's voice announcing to all who might be interested and hoping, of course, that the message would reach the boys, that the trial of the two thieves who had been caught in the bank robbery, had been set for an early date. Only a little over a week from that time.

Then the voice ceased to be replaced by others that held no interest. As though by common consent the boys removed their headphones, congratulating themselves that they had been lucky enough to catch Doc. Denby's message.

"They ought to hang those fellows," said Dick, scowling as he remembered how close his father had come to being killed. "They should treat a thief just as they do a murderer, for every thief is ready to murder if he finds himself cornered."

"Well, I'll be satisfied if they get a jail sentence, provided it's long enough," said Tom. "I wish the cops had managed to wing

a couple more of them, just the same, when they had the chance," he added bloodthirstily.

"It does make your blood boil to think of the other scoundrels, especially that fellow Muggs Murray with the scar, getting off scot free," agreed Phil, adding confidently, "Never mind, we'll get 'em, yet."

It was a few days later when Captain Bradley summoned Phil and told him that he wanted him to go on a mission for him to another camp of Rangers about fifteen miles distant.

Phil fairly leapt at the chance and Captain Bradley smiled at his enthusiasm.

"Nothing can scare you fellows, that's one sure thing," he said approvingly. "I've had plenty of daredevils in my command before, but none of them ever ate up danger quite the way you boys do. And there is danger too, plenty of it," he said, more seriously. "Espato's gang is on the rampage. They're out for blood. These darn Mexicans are regular man eaters when they get going—"

"And they're 'going' most of the time," interjected Phil, with a smile.

"Right," laughed the Captain. "Whatever else we may have against them, we can't complain that they're slow. Well, now you know that there is plenty of danger mixed up in

this canter of yours and I want you to take every possible precaution."

"I will," Phil assured him. "They'll have to get up early in the morning to catch me."

And so, fully forewarned of the perils before him, Phil started off one sunshiny morning, with the affectionate farewells of his friends ringing in his ears. If he had any doubts of the successful outcome of his mission, he was certainly not aware of them. He was conscious, mostly, of being sorry for the boys because they had to stay at home.

They had asked permission to accompany him but Captain Bradley had refused, on the ground that one rider could get through where three or four could not.

"A company would attract attention—and probable disaster—not only to themselves," so he explained to them, "but to the message which it is most important that I get through to Major Gaynor," the latter commanding the neighboring camp of Rangers, "without delay. I'm sorry to disappoint you lads, for I know what joy it would be to you to go but—you see how it is."

The fact that they "saw" did not keep them from being considerably disgruntled. They were apprehensive, too, for Phil's safety.

"If he gets spotted by a band of those guerrillas," grumbled Dick, "he won't have

one chance in a hundred of getting out of it alive. I don't care what the Captain says, I believe in the safety of numbers."

"But the message—" began Steve.

"Oh," said Dick impolitely, "Hang the message!"

However, as far as any danger was concerned, Phil might have been cantering along a bridle path in his beloved Castleton. His horse, a beautiful big bay, was possessed of a steady, apparently easy going stride which, nevertheless, ate up the miles with surprising rapidity.

He passed some rangers on the way whom he saluted easily, but not a Mexican of any kind did he see. Mixed with relief over this fact, was a queer disappointment. The journey was not living up to its reputation, as far as danger was concerned. If he could have looked ahead for only a few hours into the future—but then, perhaps, it was just as well that he couldn't.

By noon time he had reached the ranger camp. He handed the message to Major Gaynor,—a weather-beaten old soldier who had seen many long years of guerrilla warfare,—with a tremendous feeling of relief. He had accomplished his mission, anyway and now, if anything happened to him it would be his own affair.

The rangers received him like a long lost brother and insisted that he should stay and have some "chow" with them. This they had little trouble in persuading him to do for he was nearly famished and the smell of cooking things from the mess tent was irresistible.

And after "chow" he lingered, so interested in the merry stories of camp life bandied about by the fellows that it was with surprise and a bit of consternation that he realized the afternoon was "getting on." And not even Phil was anxious to ride far in the Mexican country after dark.

His new-found friends, flung jolly farewells after him, mingled with advice as to how to find the shortest way back to camp. Phil shouted his answers and then urged on his horse, determined to reach his destination before nightfall.

His horse had been well fed and cared for and the two or three hours rest bore fruit now in his speed. He put out at a great rate and probably everything would have been well had not Phil, in some way or other, mistaken his path. Probably the many suggestions of the rangers had confused him. At any rate, he did mistake the way and spent an hour or two of fruitless wandering before he struck the right path again. And when

he once more started for camp, the shadows were lengthening in the west.

Dusk was almost upon him, when, riding as noiselessly as he could through the trees, he was startled when a sudden turn in the path disclosed a fire deep in the woods. It was evidently a camp fire for it burned with a steady glare.

"A meeting place for some of Espato's band," thought Phil, checking his horse and trying to peer deeper into the gloom. As his eyes became better accustomed to the glare of the fire he thought he could distinguish figures grouped about it.

Swinging quietly to the ground, he tethered his horse to a tree. Then, with as much caution as a native "Mex", he crept forward toward the light among the trees.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Outlaws' Rendezvous

It was dangerous work, in those days of unspeakable atrocities committed by Espato's gang of outlaws, to attempt to investigate a mysterious fire in the woods, especially alone.

Phil was fully alive to the dangers of his position, but the hope that he might discover something to the advantage of the Rangers, drove him on.

Frequently casting glances over his shoulders at the threatening shadows of the woodland, he made his way cautiously, step by step, as silent as a cat, toward the fire.

Twice a twig cracked under his foot with a noise that seemed to him like the report of a pistol shot and he stopped dead in his tracks tensely on the alert, ready to spring back toward the spot where he had tethered his horse, should the need of action arrive.

But he heard nothing except the gentle sounds of the woodland at dusk, the twittering of sleepy birds, the faint trickling of running water somewhere in the distance. And

each time he crept on with greater caution than before, almost afraid to breathe for fear the sound might betray him.

Once he had the impression that he was being watched, that someone was close to him, keeping stealthy step with him.

Driven by the vividness of this impression he twice whirled suddenly about on his heels, hoping to trap the stalker, if he really were being followed. But nothing was visible in the deepening dusk of the woods. Chiding himself for the obsession, he straightened his shoulders and crept on doggedly toward the sinister mystery of the camp fire.

Yet, reason with himself as he might, he could not shake off that weird impression of an unseen adversary, stalking him, warily.

"Phil, old boy," he muttered, as on hands and knees, he wormed and wriggled himself toward the illumined space, "guess you'd better go home and sit in a rocking chair with your hands folded—if you're going to get many fool ideas like this."

There came the sound of voices now but the owners of them, evidently realizing the need for caution, were speaking so guardedly that Phil knew he would have to get quite close to them before he could catch what they were saying.

There was a huge boulder just at the very

outermost edge of the fire's glare and Phil knew that if he could reach the cover of it he would be close enough to overhear the fellows' conversation without running any risk of being observed.

But how to reach this coveted spot without being seen? This was indeed a problem for the trees were rather sparsely grouped at this point and he would be obliged to come almost into the open before he could reach the shelter of the rock. And still—the eerie sensation of that invisible enemy crouching at his elbow!

Only for a moment did Phil hesitate. Then, crouched almost double, he sprang across the cleared space and reached the safety of the boulder. So silent and quick was his action that the men grouped about the fire did not pause for a moment in their talk, did not even glance in his direction. Evidently they had no suspicion that they were being watched.

For a full moment Phil did not dare alter the cramped position in which he had landed behind the rock. Holding his breath, straining his ears to catch the first sound that might denote suspicion, he crouched there, every sense on the alert.

After awhile he began to distinguish something of what they were saying. And after his conviction that they were not aware of

his presence had become a certainty, he finally shifted his position ever so slightly, so that he might peer around the edge of the rock.

What he saw caused him to start involuntarily—his foot, dislodging a small stone, sent it clattering noisily, for the man whose sullen, dissipated face first came within the range of his vision was "Rocks" Gurney. There could be no mistake about it—it was no other than the rascal himself.

Phil's start of surprise almost proved his undoing. For at the sharp rattling of the dislodged stone several of the men about the fire jumped suspiciously to their feet.

"There's someone listening in on this," said Rocks Gurney, gruffly. "Better take a little look about, friends."

Following his suggestion, they took a look about, while Phil crouched breathlessly in the shadow of his boulder and prayed that they might not detect him. As a matter of fact they did, for Phil's shadow fitted so closely into that of the rock that they overlooked him entirely.

After thrashing about among the bushes for awhile, one of them coming so close to Phil as almost to touch him, they straggled back to the fire again and resumed their conversation.

Phil, breathing freely once more and taking himself to task for the carelessness that had almost been his undoing, ventured to peer around the rock again, taking care this time that his foot touched no treacherous stone.

There were five of the rascals in all, big, hulking, villainous looking men and something tightened about Phil's heart when he saw that the man who was evidently the leader—judging from his authoritative manner, bore a large, ugly scar across his face.

"The leader of the robber gang," flashed across his mind, his nerves tingling with excitement. "Gee but I'm in luck," he thought exultantly. "If I could get back the rest of that money, it would sure put the bank on its feet again."

Then, tense in every muscle, determined to glean as much information as was possible, Phil listened to what "Rocks" Gurney was saying.

"It's up to you to do something, Murray, and do it quick," he was addressing the man with the scar, in his usual surly tones. "Them two guys are plumb scared out of their senses. They've a hunch they're going to get a bundle of years out of this fracas and they've gone loco over the notion that all they need is

money to buy a lawyer and they'll get out of the whole thing scot free."

No answer from the leader of the gang, save a deepening of the scowl upon his face. However, Phil noticed that the other outlaws glanced at each other uneasily and drew a little closer to the fire.

"What do they want of me?" asked the man with the scar, at last.

"Money," answered Rocks, laconically. "Bunches of hard cash."

"And if I refuse?" asked the leader in the same tone.

"Then it's set the cops on your trail," observed Gurney, and at this the man with the scar lost a little of his stolidity. There was a muttering from his followers like the threatening growl of some vicious animal.

"They will, will they?" muttered Murray, his fist clenching into what might be, Phil thought, a most formidable weapon in a hand to hand struggle. "Well, we'll see about that."

For a while he sat silent while his men watched him furtively and Rocks Gurney sat staring into the fire. Phil, cramping in his strained position, waited impatiently.

Murray was speaking and Phil held his breath to listen. If only he might learn of their plans—.

"Meet me here, day after tomorrow," Murray was saying, adding with a growl for the men who were blackmailing him, "When they are free we will deal with them as one deals with a traitor. But now—they will get what they want."

Phil was exultant. He had learned what he had wanted most to learn! Day after tomorrow Murray and his gang, Rocks Gurney and—the money would be here on this spot. But—the Rangers would be here too!

Silently, knowing that every minute he lingered made less likely his escape, Phil slipped from the shelter of the rock and crept back toward his horse.

CHAPTER XIX

A Blow in the Dark

Perhaps, the thought leaped into his head, lending speed to his retreat, if he hurried, he might even now get back to camp and summon help in time to apprehend the rascals.

And always as he crept along he had the sensation that someone was following him, keeping step with him. Once he could almost have sworn that he detected a footstep other than his own. Yet, when he stopped, nothing but deep silence greeted him. There was no sign of a human presence.

He had begun to fear that, in the darkness he had mistaken his path again when a soft whining right ahead of him, made his heart jump with gladness. A few steps more and he could see the bulk of his bay horse looming against the dusk. The animal was straining a little at the leash and stamping impatiently.

"Getting hungry, poor old boy," thought Phil, adding, with a grin, as he stepped out into the open. "And he isn't the only one.

Say, won't the fellows open their eyes when I spin my yarn to them? They'll be green with envy to think they weren't in on it. Hi, old boy," this last softly to the big horse, as he began to unfasten the tethering rope, "it's us for camp now as hard as you can gallop."

He was about to swing into the saddle when again the suspicion, amounting, this time, to certainty that someone was following him, caused him to turn sharply about.

A rustling of underbrush, the swift vision of a villainous club upraised to strike, then—a terriffic pain in his head, a drifting off into illimitable space, then—nothingness!

It was a long time before Phil awoke to the consciousness of anything. And then, the pain in his head was so unbearable that he almost wished he might go back to sleep again.

He was lying on something that bumped horribly and it was several minutes before he summoned interest enough in life to find out what it was. There was a terrible pain in his wrists and his whole body felt numb and dead.

At last he was able to prop his swollen eyelids open far enough to find that he was bound fast to his horse and that a villainous-looking person, mounted on a rangy Mexican pony was urging the big bay on at a pace that

was almost a gallop. No wonder his head ached, bound as he was, face down to the loping animal.

There were other horsemen in the party, a considerable number, Phil thought, judging from the noise they made. They were evidently quite hilarious, gutturally shouting coarse jokes back and forth.

Because the pain in his head was so great, Phil closed his eyes. He tried to think. These were Mexicans who had captured him, without a doubt, in all probability a band of the dreaded outlaws. If they were some of Espato's men, then indeed was he in a tight fix. Espato had sworn to have the lives of his chums and himself. Well, here was his chance to have a hack at one of them anyway. It is characteristic of Phil that, even in this moment of danger, he could spare a thought for his chums. He was glad that Captain Bradley had been firm in his refusal to allow them to accompany him on this adventure. At least they were safe at camp.

At thought of camp Phil shivered a little, a wave of intense longing engulfing him. Would he ever see camp again? Then, because it made his head ache worse than ever, he tried not to think. It was no use. The horrible thoughts whirled about in his aching brain maddeningly.

Espato! Those tales they had heard in camp of his cruelty to prisoners. Such hideous things had been done in that remote camp of his in the mountains. Phil shuddered again and the slight motion caused the bonds about his wrists to cut deeper into the flesh. They sure had trussed him up neatly, he thought with a grimace of pain as he crouched closer to the neck of his horse.

The Mexican who was riding next to him noticed the motion and laughed hoarsely.

"Aha, young feller," he cried in his broken English. "You have decide to come back to this cold world, eh? I theenk you will find it one verry cold world—yess." Again he laughed and the laughter was taken up by the others, sneering, mocking, making the blood run cold in Phil's veins.

The next moment he was on fire with rage. Cowards—to taunt a fellow when they knew he was helpless to strike back. Just let them loose those cruel bonds from his hand and feet and he'd show 'em.

But in his heart he knew there would be no loosening of those bonds and he had to grit his teeth to bear the pain of them. The Mexicans continued to laugh and jeer at him and he tried his best to close his ears to their taunts. If only he could manage to keep

quiet! If only he could make them think that he did not hear!

He knew the hopelessness, under the circumstances, of answering them. It would only be giving them the chance they were looking for, to hurl further insult upon him.

Those bonds, those bonds — if only he might have them loosened for half a moment, just long enough to allow the blood to flow into his numbed fingers. A groan found its way to his tightly pressed lips, but he managed, somehow, to stifle it. He would not make an outcry. He would die before he would let them know how he was suffering! Doggedly, he set his teeth still harder.

He tried to think back to that moment when he had been struck. He remembered thinking in that second of time before the uplifted cudgel had crashed down on his head that he had been discovered by some of Murray's gang. That was the natural supposition. Having caught him in the act of eavesdropping and fearing that he knew too much of their plans, the thieves would want nothing so much as to put him out of the way.

But it had not been one of Murray's gang who had struck that murderous blow. That was moderately certain since he was now riding over the desert, a captive of Mexican

bandits. It had almost surely been a Mexican who had attacked him.

Then, like a flash, came the recollection, of his strange certainty that someone had been dogging his steps back there in the woods. He had thought it only his imagination, when, in reality it had been fact.

Followed as a cat follows a mouse, silently, relentlessly, awaiting the right moment to spring. At the thought, a creepy sensation traveled up and down his spine. It was horrible to think of himself being followed like that.

And now, that the cat had caught the mouse, he supposed that the cat would proceed to play with it, in the playful little manner that is common to cats.

Phil's heart misgave him. It was not a pleasant thought, being played with by Espato! The old scoundrel seldom killed his victims outright. He took plenty of time about it so that he might enjoy the execution to the full. Espato was even longer on torture than the cat. Having come this far in his reflections, Phil refused to think further. It wouldn't do to think very much about such things.

Then he thought of Murray and his gang of thieves going scot free and he was forced to smother another groan. If only he might

have managed to get his message through to camp before his capture. It would have been such a great thing, to have apprehended the thieves and perhaps have restored the entire amount of money stolen from the Castleton bank. And now they in all probability would be allowed to get away without any punishment at all.

He had little time to think about this however, for the sinister little group of horsemen soon deserted the desert for the woods and there began a slow and tortuous climb up a steep, rocky, mountain path, that seemed to Phil a never-ending horror.

The little Mexican ponies made easy work of it, but Phil's big horse, urged on relentlessly by the Mexican who rode close to them, stumbled several times and once almost fell, wrenching Phil's tortured wrists so horribly that in spite of all he could do a little whispered cry of pain escaped him.

"Aha," cried the Mexican delightedly. "The Americano suffers. Good. But it ees nothing to what he will suffer. Be prepared, Americano. Espato, he wait for you!"

CHAPTER XX

In Bitter Bondage

At the sound of the dreaded Espato's name, uttered by the little Mexican, Phil had a fleeting instant of despair. He had guessed into whose hands he had fallen but he had not been sure. While there had been a shadow of uncertainty, there had been also, hope. But now—.

Up, up, climbed the straggling party till it seemed that they must reach the top of the world. Twice again Phil's horse stumbled and almost fell, only to be lashed viciously to his feet. And each time Phil struggled with the desire to cry aloud in his agony. How much further? How much further?

And yet, even while he longed for the end of this nightmare ride, Phil shuddered away from the thought of what would really happen to him when they reached the end of it. Torture—death—if only they would put death first!

There might be a chance of escape, but

that chance would be slight, to say the least. Espato's mountain strongholds were famous because they were well nigh impregnable. Once within one of those dungeons—again Phil stopped thinking.

There was Dick and Steve and good old Tom, and for a moment, the thought of them brought hope. But the next moment his heart sank again. He knew how slight the chance of rescue was. Why the fellows had no clue to work on. To them it would seem that he had disappeared just as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed him up.

Then, the relief of traveling on even ground again, the glare of an immense camp fire in his eyes and the mingled shouts and commands and greetings uttered in the guttural Mexican tongue.

The little Mexican who had ridden close to Phil, now leaned over with a leer on his evil face.

"We have arrive, Americano," he announced. "Awake so that you may meet the great Espato with all the humility which ees due so great a man. Arouse yourself, Americano." And with the words he kicked the captive scornfully.

Phil's helpless fingers gripped themselves together, causing the bonds to bite deeper

into the raw flesh. Phil never felt the sudden increase in pain. He was too hot with rage.

"The dog," he fumed helplessly. "If I ever get out of this, I'll show him."

Amid a confused impression of innumerable horses and men, a babble of coarse jests and laughter and the sullen flickering of the fire, Phil was dragged from his horse and was half led, half pushed, half carried, along by a couple of ruffians who spat upon him and called him vile names. Then he was flung unceremoniously into a dark apartment, a final kick administered by way of good measure and he was left alone. A padlock clicked ominously and Phil could hear the voices of his captors dying away as they went to join their comrades.

For a moment he lay as they had left him, face lown on the dank stone floor, too utterly exhausted to move a muscle.

His body was bruised with the kicks and cuffs of his captors, the pain in his wrists and ankles was almost unendurable, his head throbbed dully. And yet there was a great relief in lying upon a surface that did not rock and jolt, upon which one might lie quiet, conscious of each aching muscle—.

After awhile he started to roll over slowly, painfully, upon his back. It was an almost

impossible feat, considering that his hands were bound behind him and his ankles tied together so that every motion caused him almost unendurable agony.

But after an age of dogged trying, he accomplished it at last and lay on his back, straining his eyes in the attempt to distinguish the outlines of this prison.

There was a slit about big enough to allow a man's hand to pass through, evidently a crevice in the rock. Phil figured that if he were standing the slit would be about on a level with his head. Through this make-believe window there flickered a faint red glow, probably a reflection of the glare from the fire without.

As Phil's eyes became more accustomed to the darkness he distinguished a bulky object running along one side of the dungeon—probably belonging to that type of prison furniture which serves as a bench in the day time and a bed at night.

There was a damp, musty smell about the place, intolerably close and stifling and there was a scuffling over in one corner suggestive of rats.

If he could only get his feet free for a moment, thought Phil desperately. There must be some way out of the place if he could only find it.

For a moment he thought furiously of breaking his bonds by sheer strength, but his tortured flesh cried out so in protest that he was forced to give up the attempt.

Anyway, if he should break his bonds, what good would it do him? Here he was in what seemed to be a cavern hollowed out from the heart of the rock. There was one little aperture about big enough for his hand to go through. The only other exit was the door and that was bolted and padlocked securely.

"I'm caught and I might as well make up my mind to it," he thought bitterly. Then, because it hurt his wrists still more to lie on his back, he began the slow and painful process of turning on his face again.

He was conscious suddenly of a new and overwhelming discomfort. He was hungry—ravenously hungry. For an hour, whose every minute seemed an age, he lay there, motionless while his feet and hands lost all sense of feeling. He wondered miserably if part of Espato's plan of torture included starving him to death.

At last came the sound of a bolt being withdrawn, a key clicked in the lock and two men entered his prison. Looking up, he saw that one of them was the little Mexican who

had ridden close to him on that nightmare journey.

"Take the rope off hees feet, Pedro," he directed his companion. "It is necessary that he walk into the great Espato's presence."

The rope was being removed from about his feet—none too gently, at that. Then the two men lifting him up, forcing him to stand upon what seemed like two flabby pincushions, into which the pins were beginning to stick agonizingly.

Phil never forgot that awful march into the presence of the bandit chief, his two captors driving him on relentlessly with blows and kicks, his feet aching with a pain that is like nothing else in all the world, the pain of blood rushing into a part of the body from which it had been cut off.

Then he had been pushed into the glare of the fire, swaying on his tortured feet while innumerable swarthy faces leered at him mockingly. Summoning all his strength he gave them back glare for glare dauntlessly.

There was a murmuring in the crowd of men, a deferential giving way as a swart, stocky man, pushed his way through. Instantly Phil forgot all the others as he gazed at this man. For there was a long, ugly gash across his forehead and in that startled moment Phil recognized the man as the one

whom he had struck with his revolver upon that memorable day when the Mexicans had tried to surround the plane and he and his chums had made their spectacular escape.

And by the gleam in the other's eye it could be seen that he also recognized Phil.

"So," said the Mexican in a soft, drawling voice—Phil was later to learn that when this man spoke in his gentlest accents, the danger was greatest, "You have come to me, Americano, like a little lamb to the slaughter. You fight well, senor," with a slight motion of his hand toward the scar on his forehead. "But something, perhaps it is a little bird, whispers to me, the great Espato, that you have fought your last fight, Americano."

Then the great truth dawned upon Phil. It had been no other than the bandit Chief himself who had been knocked out in such a masterly manner by the blow of his—Phil's—own revolver. At memory of that beautiful scrimmage Phil momentarily forgot his great danger. He even grinned.

"Well, Espato," he said, "perhaps you're right about my having scrapped my last scrap, but at least," his mocking eyes on the ugly scar which adorned the man's forehead, "I gave you something to remember me by."

CHAPTER XXI

Threats of Torture

This remark of Phil's came near to being the last one that he would ever make. With a snarl like some ferocious animal, Espato leaped forward and struck him full in the face. Phil reeled at the blow, stumbled and would have fallen save that he came into dizzying contact with a great tree directly behind him.

Against this support he leaned, praying for strength to meet whatever horrors might be in store for him. He had angered the villainous Espato. Now he must pay the price.

The chief of the Mexicans came close to him, his lips drawn back from his strong white teeth in a snarl. His face was convulsed with fury.

"Dog, fool of an Americano," he shouted, shaking his fist beneath Phil's nose. "You think to taunt Espato in his stronghold, eh? Dios, you shall taste of his vengeance. Yess."

He struck Phil again and the latter ground his teeth in impotent fury. It he could only get

his hands free. Just for one little moment!

Espato must have read his thoughts, for he laughed softly, gloatingly.

"Ah," he said, his voice once more gentle and drawling. "The Americano wish to have his bonds cut, eh, so that he may fight Espato? No. That is not Espato's way."

"No, you blackguard," cried Phil, furiously. "I know well it isn't your way to give a fellow a fighting chance. Take these ropes off my hands and I'll fight you unarmed."

"Is he not courageous, the Americano," sneered Espato while the grins deepened on the faces of his followers. "But you will need all of your courage, little one, never fear. Before we get through with you my game cock, you will be crying aloud for mercy. Where will your fine courage be then, Americano?"

"You lie," muttered Phil, between clenched teeth. "You can kill me, of course. I'm helpless. But you won't get a sound out of me."

"We will kill you, oh, yess, we will kill you," said Espato, and the voice of the bandit sounded to Phil like the hiss of some poisonous snake. "But we will not kill you at once. Oh, no. That would be too good for one who has defied the great Espato. We will hang you up by your thumbs, my little friend, until they have been pulled from the

sockets. Then, if you faint, we will take you down and revive you. Ah, yess, it iss no part of our plan that you should faint."

A hoarse chuckle from someone in the shadows and over Phil there passed a deathly nausea. He was sick and dizzy from the blow on his head and he was weak from lack of food. If the villains intended to torture him why didn't they hurry up and get to it, he thought, miserably. Anything would be better than this!

"And after we have revive you," Espato was saying in his maddening drawl, "then we will perhaps open up a vein or two and into your hot blood, my friend we will pour a little boiling lead. That is to cure you of hot temper, my Americano."

"I should think," said Phil, with defiance in his tone, "I should think that would cure anybody."

"Ah, you see fit to joke, my frien'," remarked Espato with an evil smile. "Good, it will give me great pleasure to erase the smiles from your face. Ten minutes in the torture dungeon an' you will not smile. Ah, no, they do not smile then. You will look like this then, my friend." He distorted his face into a horrible grimace of agony and Phil turned away, sickened.

"Ah," cried the rascal, delightedly, turn-

ing Phil's face about roughly, so that he was forced to look at him. "You are not, perhaps, quite so happy as you were, eh? Good. We have already begun to erase the smiles from your face. You look sick, my frien'. Ah, I remember," he added, in the apologetic tones of a host who has forgotten his duty toward a guest. "You are hungry. Ah, yess, you mus' be famish'. Tony, Tony Gomez," he called and from the shadows there stepped forth a young Mexican, who stood sullenly awaiting further orders from his chief. "You will take this so distinguish visitor of ours," with a mocking sweep of his hand toward Phil, "back to the guest chamber. An' then you will take to him food, the best what we have. It is not our intention, senor," he swept Phil a low bow, "to starve you to death. Ah, no. We wish that you be in the best of good spirits, so that you may the better enjoy the entertainment which we bring to you later. Ah, yess. You must be strong an' well, my game cock, so that we may the better enjoy your enjoyment. Good night, an' the mos' pleasant of dreams, Americano."

The young Mexican, Tony Gomez, seized Phil roughly by the arm and hurried him past the group of sneering faces about the fire and thrust him again into the damp, evil-

smelling dungeon which he had occupied before.

Gloomy and forbidding as the place was it was a relief after his recent ordeal for here at least, he could be alone. He sank wearily down upon the stone bench at the farther end of his prison while Tony Gomez with a muttered word or two about bringing some food, went out, closing and barring the door behind him.

The prison was absolutely dark, save for that little slit far up in the wall. The flickering of the firelight through this aperture seemed only to emphasize the gloom.

But dark as was his prison, Phil's thoughts were darker and gloomier still. To him, at that moment there seemed no possible way out of his horrible predicament.

If he had only his radio outfit. His face brightened at the mere thought, then clouded again. What was the use of thinking of the impossible, he asked himself bitterly. He had no radio outfit and there was about as much chance of getting one as there was that Espato might relent and let him go free.

But in spite of all he could do, he could not get rid of the idea. Radio—and the solution of his desperate problem! By this time of course, the Radio Boys had missed him, in all probability were at this moment searching

frantically for him. If he had a radio set, even the smallest and most primitive of sets, he might get a message through to them—a message which would bring the Rangers galloping to his rescue.

At the thought a thrill shot through his veins, a light came in his eyes—the light of battle. Then he pulled himself together, calling himself all sorts of names for being such an idiot.

"I might just as well say," he mused, relaxing wearily on the unyielding stone of the bench, "that if I could find a million dollars, I'd be a millionaire. If I could find a radio set, I'd be a free man. There's about as much chance one way as the other."

In a few moments the man called Gomez returned, bearing with him a steaming tray of eatables. Now, when Espato had devilishly promised to give him plenty to eat so that he would be in shape to suffer longer the torture that was in store for him, Phil had made a resolution then and there, to eat nothing, no matter how much he might be tempted.

But now, when Gomez laid the tray upon a stone table which, in the darkness, Phil had not seen, the temptation was more than he could bear. He was famished, he was young

and, in spite of the trap into which he had fallen, life was still mighty sweet to him.

Gomez lighted a candle which he had brought in with him and set it upon the table. By the flickering light Phil could see that besides bread and butter, there was a steaming dish of some Mexican concoction, that under other circumstances might have seemed villainous but just now appealed to him as most savory and appetizing.

Gomez removed the bonds from his numbed hands and as soon as he had regained the use of them at all, Phil set to with a will. When he was finished there was not enough left on that tray to feed a hungry kitten.

And through it all the young Mexican called Tony Gomez stood immovable beside the captive, watching him. And was it possible that in his sullen black eyes there was just a trace of sympathy?

CHAPTER XXII

Held For Ransom

And while Phil was eating his meal, a conversation was taking place between Espato and Juan Arigo, his lieutenant, which affected the captive very closely.

Directly after Phil had been locked up in his prison again, Arigo had drawn his chief apart from the others and had begun to talk earnestly with him, hands and arms gesticulating wildly.

At first Espato had not appeared particularly pleased with the suggestions of his lieutenant, but gradually his face had cleared and into his eyes had crept a covetous gleam.

"Perhaps you are right, Arigo," he said at last and fell to stroking his chin thoughtfully.

"I know I am right," retorted the lieutenant with a mixture of deference and boldness. Next to the bandit chief he was the worst feared man in all the Mexican country. "Loot has been scarce. Our larders are nearly empty. Someway we must fill them.

This young Americano is a chance sent from heaven."

The chief nodded slowly.

"His friends will pay one grand ransom," he said, rubbing his hands together as though he already felt the good American gold between them. "They think much of this Americano—and with reason. He is dangerous to the Mexicans—ver-ry dangerous. He rob us of prisoners, of money, he make of me a marked man, this scar upon my forehead so that everyone may know me. He is most desperate. He iss dangerous to Mexicans. He should die."

It was plain that he was working himself into a passion and Arigo shrugged indifferently.

"Kill the Americano—no loot," he said, adding slyly, "The money of the Americanos buys many things."

Espato hesitated, the scowl on his scarred forehead deepening.

"It is true that we need gold," he said, "But to let that scoundrel go free, to fly in his accursed bird machine over the Mexican camp, dropping bombs, to laugh as the Mexicans die. No, it is too much you ask. Not even for the sake of gold—much gold—will I relinquish my vengeance."

Then it was that Arigo leaned over to

whisper slyly into the ear of his chief. Whatever his message, it had an instantaneous and most happy effect upon Espato. He smiled, he beamed, he clapped Arigo heartily upon the back.

"Aha, you are of good counsel, my frien'," he said, beamingly. "It is queer that I did not think of the thing myself. It is so ver-ry simple. We get the money from the stupid Americano — lots money, yess — an' we still have the young Americano in our power for which they pay this gold. We shall still have our vengeance. A joke, Arigo. How we shall laugh!"

Together they roared with laughter and then went jovially back to join their comrades about the fire.

Meanwhile, Phil, finishing the last crumb on the tray, was feeling distinctly more hopeful. In spite of the fact that there still seemed no possibility of finding a convenient radio set anywhere, he had begun to believe, against reason, perhaps, that some way or other, his chums would find out his whereabouts and come to his rescue.

The taunts of Espato and his threats of torture began to seem impossible, fantastic. In these days such things didn't happen. And yet, despite all his hopefulness he knew beyond a shadow of reasonable doubt, that such

things did happen, in Espato's camp, at least.

When he had finished, the Mexican who, all this time, had remained at his side, grunted something and Phil glanced up at him inquiringly.

The Mexican was holding out the rope which he had removed from Phil's wrists so that he might eat. Phil understood. The fellow was going to bind him up again.

He looked at his wrists, red and swollen from the pressure of the ropes and then glanced up at the sullen Mexican with a disarming smile.

"I couldn't get out of this place," he said, waving his hands at the blank walls, "not if I had twenty arms and legs and all of them free, at that. It would be lots more comfortable if you didn't truss me up again."

The Mexican hesitated, and in his eyes was again that strange, softened look. If the fellow was not actively sympathetic, then neither was he actively unfriendly.

Phil sensed something of all this and he thrilled with hope. If he could make a friend at camp—but again he laughed at himself for being an idiot. Imagining the impossible again!

The Mexican was slowly shaking his head.

"No can do," he said in laborious English. "Espato say 'Tie up Americano.' Ver' well,

Tony Gomez he do so. Espato word—law, senor."

Something about the way he uttered Espato's name made Phil glance at him sharply. He was dreaming again—or had there really been a cold dislike in the man's voice?

But no, the Mexican's dark, sullen face was as impassive as ever. He was still holding out the bonds with a resigned patience. With a sigh Phil rose and clasped his hands behind his back. There was no use fighting. He might just as well submit.

But the Mexican grunted again and again Phil looked at him inquiringly. The man was motioning him to put his hands in front.

"No tie 'em behind back," he said. "Americano no can sleep. Tie 'em in front."

Phil was duly grateful for this small kindness and told the Mexican so—although, as a matter of fact, he couldn't imagine himself sleeping in that rat-infested place, especially with a hard pallet as his only bed.

Tony Gomez left him soon after that, taking with him the empty tray and the candle. Not another word had passed between Phil and the young Mexican, and yet, foolish as he told himself it was, he had been strangely reassured by the other's manner.

"That fellow isn't very much in sympathy with old Espato," he thought as, stretched

out on his hard bed, he thought over the harrowing events of the night. "There was something in his voice when he spoke of him a while ago, that sounded as if he had it in for the old scoundrel, I suppose that isn't unusual though," he added, thoughtfully. "Probably there are lots of his men who aren't in sympathy with all the things their chief does. They simply obey him because they're afraid to do anything else. But there you are again," he told himself, once more yielding to utter discouragement. "Even if this Antonio Gomez, or whatever his name is, really wanted to help me out—which of course, he doesn't—he wouldn't dare. I suppose that old scoundrel Espato would hack him into little pieces if he should find him out. He seems to enjoy doing that sort of thing." And he shivered as he thought of the various kinds of torture Espato had promised him.

Outside there rose the sound of loud laughter. Evidently Espato and his followers were making merry—celebrating his capture, perhaps and the enjoyment they expected to have in torturing him, later on.

It was maddening to lie there so near the outside world and freedom and yet to feel himself bound, a captive, utterly at the mercy of a scoundrel who was notoriously known to show no mercy.

Phil ground his teeth and tried to shift to another position which might prove a little less uncomfortable.

"If ever I get out of this alive," he thought, miserably, "Make believe I won't appreciate a good bed again. It's funny how you never do half appreciate those things until you have to do without them. But I guess I won't have to worry about beds or anything else very much longer," he added, bitterly. "I guess Espato was right. I've pretty near fought my last fight."

Toward morning, just as dawn was breaking over the hills, he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Bandit's Messenger

It was a gorgeous day, that first day of Phil's imprisonment in the dungeon with the slit high up in the wall, a kind of day when boys, especially the Radio Boys, always longed to do something particularly daring and thrilling—anything, so long as it promised adventure.

Alas for poor Phil! Rising from his hard bed, cramped and aching in every muscle of his body, so stiff that he could hardly move, he gazed longingly at the patch of intensely blue sky that could be seen through the makeshift slit of a window.

"Such a day for flying," he groaned, sinking down on the stone bench that had served him for a bed, his head hanging dejectedly. "Say, just to jump in the Arrow and fly through that golden air, eh? Seems as if I'd had my last look at that old boat."

"Just the kind of a day, too," he added, staring up again at that tempting bit of sky, "for sending and receiving radio. There would

hardly be any interference from static. But there I go again, talking like an idiot. What good is radio, anyway, if, when you most need it you can't have it."

"And there's Rocks Gurney too, the scoundrel," he reflected, after an interval during which he had wondered which ached the more, his body or his mind. "Mixing it with 'Muggs' Murray's gang, getting rich on that haul from the bank. That's why he blossomed out so suddenly in flashy clothes and a car and all. It's a wonder we didn't catch on at the time. We knew he was no good, but we didn't think he was quite that bad.

"That's how the thieves happened to know just the right time to pull off the robbery too," he added, waxing excited as the whole despicable plot revealed itself to him, like the pieces of a picture puzzle being fitted together. "Gurney knew just the day when the mills paid their men and when the bank had a big amount of cash on hand. Then 'Rocks' tipped off his information to 'Muggs' Murray and his gunmen and—there you are. As simple as A B C when you know the answer. Rocks Gurney is worse than Murray's gang because he ought to know better. Wouldn't I like to get my hands on that fellow. I'd give him a lots worse trimming than I did before."

He clenched his hands in the desire to get hold of Rocks Gurney and the action caused him to glance down at them despairingly. Oh, yes, he would do a lot, he would, bound hand and foot, captive to Espato and, for all he knew, only a few hours more of life before him. For all he. Phil, could do, Gurney and Muggs Murray's blackguards could escape without even a scratch to tell them how near they had come to capture.

Oh, they would escape all right and it was all his fault too, for not being more careful. He wondered, feeling horribly hungry again, if he was to be given anything to eat, or if Espato proposed doing away with him before breakfast.

But no, that would be too quick a death and Espato had promised him a slower and harder path out of this good old world. He recalled some of the scoundrel's blood-curdling descriptions of what was to happen to him and he shuddered. They were not particularly pleasant reflections for the early morning—especially a glorious morning like this when all nature was vibrant with life.

After a while the door of his prison opened and Tony Gomez, the mysterious young Mexican with the sullen eyes, came in. He bore a tray in one hand and a basin of cool water in the other.

At sight of the latter vessel, Phil could hardly repress a shout of delight. He wanted a wash almost more than he wanted food.

Gomez, without a word, untied his hands and joyfully Phil dipped his face into the basin of cool, refreshing water. From this he emerged, shaking his head like a half-drowned puppy and Gomez thrust a towel into his hand.

This was indeed luxury, far more than he had dared to hope for. He told Gomez so and the Mexican stretched his mouth in a wide grin showing all his startlingly white teeth.

"Tony bring water," he said. "Senor pretty dirty."

"Say," said Phil, staring at the fellow with surprise and gratitude. "You sure are a dead game sport, Tony. How did you know I'd almost rather wash my face than eat?"

But the smile on the Mexican's face vanished. He looked alarmed and pressed a finger to his lips in a gesture of caution.

"The senor must take care," he said, his voice lowered to a guttural growl, "Espato find Tony kind to Americano, Tony die too."

"All right, old scout," said Phil, in a whisper—he was strangely hopeful and elated, now that his face was washed and he saw food before him once more. "I'll do what-

ever you say from now on. And I'll be careful about raising my voice, too. There's no use both of us being hung up by our thumbs."

The Mexican's face blanched a sickly grey and Phil was suddenly very sorry for him. He watched him curiously as he ate ravenously of the food on the tray.

He guessed, in fact, he almost knew from what scraps of conversation had already passed between them that this young Mexican was unhappy and restive under the brutal command of Espato.

And Phil thought that there was some special reason underlying the fellow's dislike —perhaps hatred—of his Chief. Perhaps there had been some personal wrong committed against himself or some member of his family.

At any rate, Phil thought, he had been mighty lucky to have fallen under the direct surveillance of one who was at least not actively unfriendly to him. Perhaps—if he should win the fellow's confidence—. But no, there would be little chance of securing Tony's assistance in a plan of escape. Tony was too terrified by Espato to join in any conspiracy against him. Probably he had been too long a witness of his commander's methods to enjoy being a victim of them.

But anyway, the chance was worth considering, thought Phil, desperately, since it

was the only possible chance in sight. If he could just get one word through to the fellows. But he might just as well wish for a trip to Mars.

After a while Tony departed, bearing with him the empty tray, and Phil was once more left to his none too pleasant reflections.

Meanwhile a messenger had been dispatched to Captain Bradley of the Rangers, informing him that one of his men was captive to Espato, the latter demanding ten thousands dollars in gold as the price of the safe return of said captive.

Captain Bradley, who had just returned at the head of one of the search parties who had been searching high and low for the vanished Phil, received the messenger none too cordially and demanded absently to know what the fellow had to say.

But at the greaser's first words he sat up in his chair, a look of utter amazement and incredulity on his face. This expression quickly changed, first to gladness at the thought that Phil was still alive, then to rage as he realized the insolence of the demand for ransom.

"You stay here for a minute," he said to the greaser, then called to a young lieutenant who was passing. In a moment the latter was starting off to find the Radio Boys and

bring them into the presence of their Captain.

The boys answered the imperative summons of their chief instantly, on their faces a queer mixture of hope and fear. They guessed that the Captain had some report of Phil and they were almost afraid to hear it.

The hours since Phil had disappeared had been the hardest ones his chums had ever spent. They had eaten little, slept scarcely at all, their entire energy concentrated on the finding of their comrade.

And when, despite all their efforts, they could discover no clue as to the whereabouts of the missing boy, they had begun reluctantly, sick at heart, to give him up for dead.

"I knew it was a fool stunt for him to go alone," Dick had almost sobbed. "What chance would he have, alone, against a bunch of villainous greasers."

"I wish we'd made him take us along now," said Tom, miserably. "Believe me, if I had it to do all over again, I'd go with him, Captain Bradley or no Captain Bradley. I wouldn't care what he said."

"Well, we haven't got the chance to do it all over again," Steve had reminded him, moodily. "Phil's gone and the chances are that if we haven't found him now, we won't. Not but what we'll keep on trying," he added doggedly, "and if it's the greasers that have

got him, we won't give up till every one of the scoundrels is dead."

"You bet we won't," Dick had agreed, but in his heart he was thinking that no amount of vengeance would bring Phil back to them. Dear old Phil, with his fun and his undaunted courage. He clenched his fists belligerently. The greasers had better keep out of his way, if they knew what was good for them!

And now had come this summons for Captain Bradley. Hardly knowing what to expect, the boys entered his presence and faced him eagerly.

In their excitement, the boys had completely overlooked the fellow standing stoically in one corner of the room but as the Captain pointed to him they turned to him, eyeing him with a mixture of curiosity and intense dislike.

"Now repeat what you just said to me," Captain Bradley commanded of the greaser.

Obediently and without the slightest trace of emotion, the fellow did as he was bid.

CHAPTER XXIV

Caged

As the substance of the Mexican's message made itself clear to the boys, they almost went mad with joy. They pounded one another on the back, shouting that dear old Phil was still in the land of the living.

Captain Bradley smiled in sympathy with their frenzy, but he gradually brought their attention back to the matter of the ransom.

"Ten thousand dollars this fellow wants for the return of your comrade," he reminded them. "It's a pretty big price, boys."

And when they brought themselves to consider this part of the proposition the boys were just as indignant at the insolence of the demand as the Captain had been.

They turned upon the greaser, who stood impassively regarding them, as though they would have taken the greatest pleasure in pounding him black and blue—which as a matter of fact, they would have.

"You darned guerrilla," muttered Steve, only his deference to his superior officer keep-

ing him from committing personal violence upon the indifferent-eyed messenger, "What's to prevent us from taking you out and lining you up before a firing squad."

"That death's too good for him," growled Dick. "We ought to follow the example of his gentle master Espato and torture him for about a week."

"Fine idea," said the usually good-natured Tom, ferociously. "I'd want to be the one to do the job, too."

The greaser shrugged his shoulders with maddening indifference.

"Do as you wish with me, senors," he said, the shadow of a smile touching the corners of his cruel mouth, "But if I am not back in two days, the Americano dies—and his death will not be of the kind which his friends would wish to see him die, either."

The boys shuddered at the thought of Phil's peril and they fumed helplessly, striving to think of some way in which they might outwit the villainous Espato. The bandit had surely caught them in a fine trap. For Phil to have fallen into the hands of such a man—.

"And if anyone attempts to follow me, senors," it was the Mexican speaking again, gaining confidence from the strength of his position, "the prisoner dies also—as well as the man who is foolish enough to follow."

He passed his hand with a significant gesture across his throat, and the boys had need of all their will power to keep from springing upon him.

They knew it was as the man said. Any act of violence on their part would only make things harder for Phil, perhaps would even cost his life. They were helpless to act because the safety of their chum depended upon their discretion.

It looked as though someway or other, impossible or not, they must manage to raise that insolently demanded ten thousand dollars. Phil must be saved.

But how was it to be done? Certainly they could not expect to raise that amount of money in no time.

This time it was the captain who spoke, as though anticipating their thoughts.

"It will take a little time to raise ten thousand dollars," he said, speaking to the Mexican. "Your chief cannot expect that it will be produced in a day."

"My chief, he is not unreasonable man," said the rascal, again with that shadow of an evil smile. "He will wait, three, four days, maybe week—but no longer. Then, no money —prisoner will die."

"Oh, you'll have your money—or rather, our money—don't worry," cried Steve, still

fighting the desire to plant his fist in the greaser's sneering face. "Go back and tell your chief that we will have the money for him in a week's time. Now get out of here, quick, before I give you what you deserve."

The rascal seemed satisfied with the proposition but he impudently took his time about leaving.

"Si, senor," he said, making them a mocking bow. "I shall return for the gold at the end of a week. It will be well not to disappoint. Adios," and with another sweeping bow he went out, leaving the boys to swallow their rage as well as they could.

"The confounded scoundrel," raged Dick. "I'd follow him and put a bullet in him if it weren't for Phil."

"Captain," Steve broke in eagerly. "If it's Espato who has captured Phil, what's to prevent our mustering out some of the boys and going after him?"

"Say, why couldn't we?" added Dick and Tom looked his eagerness.

The Captain smiled but slowly shook his head.

"It wouldn't be any use, boys," he said, adding, as he saw how their faces fell. "I hate to discourage you but you know as well as I do that Espato has a dozen hiding places in the mountains and to try to find the one

in which Phil is imprisoned would be decidedly like hunting for a needle in a haystack. Not but what I'd like first rate to get a hack at Espato," and his eyes flashed and his figure straightened after the manner of a good soldier.

Reason being against them, the boys were forced to give up their idea of a dashing rescue and fell to work on the rather discouraging problem of raising the ten thousand dollars of Phil's ransom.

"Anyway, the main thing is to know that Phil's alive," said Dick, stoutly. "What's ten thousand dollars beside that fact, anyway."

"A mere bag of shells," returned Steve, trying to sound cheerful and quite failing as he added, dolefully, "But I wish some kind little bird would whisper to us where the filthy lucre can be found."

And meanwhile, knowing nothing of all this, Phil was suffering as acutely as if every moment had really been his last. Every time voices sounded without his dungeon the thought flashed through his mind that they had come to take him to the torture chamber.

But as the hours passed, afternoon darkening into dusk and nothing startling happened, he began at first to wonder, then to take heart of hope.

Perhaps something had happened—some-

thing to his advantage. It was not like Espato to delay his vengeance in this manner. He liked to punish his prisoners while still his temper was in the red hot stage, so that vengeance might be all the sweeter. Surely, by this time his temper had begun to cool——.

Tony Gomez had entered his prison once since morning and this for the purpose of bringing him in a frugal lunch. Evidently the Mexicans did not think much of lunch, or else Espato had repented of treating him too well and had decided to start in the starving process after all.

On this occasion Tony Gomez had not said a word, and what is more, had stubbornly refused to be drawn into conversation. As a result, Phil concluded that he had been too hasty in supposing that the Mexican had a grudge against Espato. His heart sank as this one faint hope appeared about to elude him.

Toward evening the suspense became almost unbearable. Despite the ache in his muscles, Phil paced the tiny prison with the restlessness of a caged animal. He almost wished that Espato would make up his mind to kill him at once. Anything would be better than this.

And still the never-ending hours passed

slowly, monotonously. Phil wondered at the absolute stillness in the camp. Espato's greasers were usually a noisy lot. The dead silence was getting on his already overwrought nerves. He caught himself listening breathlessly for some sort of noise from the outside. He began almost to wish for the opening of the door, even if it should be Espato who entered.

Then he started as there was the noise of a rusty bolt being slipped aside and the heavy door of his prison opened slowly.

Phil braced himself, ready for anything, taking his stand at the back of the cell. Then, his mouth dropped open in utter surprise. For, instead of the brutal Espato whom he had expected to see, there crept through the narrow aperture made by the partly opened door, a pretty Mexican girl!

CHAPTER XXV

The Visitor At Dusk

To say that Phil was astonished, would have been to be putting it mildly. The sight of this young, dark-haired, dark-eyed girl, where he had more than half expected to see the villainous face of Espato, robbed him for a moment of the power of speech. He simply stood and stared.

The girl had closed the door, or rather, signaled that it should be closed, for it was pushed to from the outside, and had turned to him with a shy smile on her face.

"You are surprise to see me, senor, are you not?" she asked in a soft voice.

Then as Phil, fearing a trap, still did not answer but just stood staring at her as though she had been a ghost, the girl gave a musical little ripple of laughter and moved closer to him.

"You do not trust me, senor, perhaps," she said, and Phil flushed as he saw she had read the thought in his mind.

"I—I—," he began and then stopped short again, absolutely unable to think of a sensible thing to say. He hoped he didn't look as foolish as he felt.

But the girl had stopped laughing and now she laid a timid hand on Phil's arm.

"You are tired and ver-ry miserable," she said with a pretty seriousness. "Will you not sit down on the bench, an' I will sit on the other end of it so we may talk?"

With a feeling that he must surely be dreaming he did as the girl bid him, watching her incredulously.

Could it be that she was actually friendly to him and was trying to make him understand? In this camp of enemies such a thing seemed impossible.

"Why do you stare at me so," she reproached him and at the words he drew his eyes away from her, flushing uncomfortably. He must have been staring foolishly.

"I—beg your pardon," he began and again she laughed that soft little ripple of laughter.

"You are very polite, Americano," she said, adding demurely as she seated herself and pulled her short skirts down as far as they would go, "But I do not mind, really. It must be much surprise to you that I am here."

"Well, yes," said Phil, beginning to pull

himself together and act a little more normal. "I must say I wasn't really expecting you." He smiled and the girl clapped her hands gleefully.

"Good," she cried in her pretty voice, "It is good the Americano can still smile."

Then she clapped a hand over her mouth and glanced at the door apprehensively.

"If I let them know of my presence here," she said, half as though she were speaking to herself, "I will neither be able to help you —or save myself. I must use—what is it you Americanos say—I must use the caution."

She smiled at Phil showing two rows of even white teeth, and for the first time hope really began to stir in the boy's heart. If it were not all an elaborate trap—and somehow he thought of Espato as being more direct in his methods of vengeance—then this girl might really prove a valuable ally in escape.

Escape! The camp again, life and adventure, freedom! At the thought his eyes began to sparkle and he looked at the girl with new interest.

As though once more she read his thoughts, the girl's face clouded and she moved closer to him.

"You are thinking that I have come to help you to escape," she said quickly. "But you must not hope, Americano. Hope is

dangerous. It makes us do rash things. I tell you, it is almost impossible to escape from the camp of Espato."

Phil's heart sank again. For a moment in his disappointment he felt almost a dislike of this girl. Why had she come to raise his hopes, if all she intended to do was to dash them to the ground again? It wasn't fair.

"But you must not feel altogether discourage', my frien'," she went on, swiftly, her voice softened almost to a whisper, and glancing still more often at the door. "For I, Juanita Marino, have come to help you if such a thing is possible."

Phil glanced at her gratefully. He was ashamed of his impatience of a moment before. He knew that she was risking a great deal by coming to him this way. If she should be found out, in all probability her punishment would be almost as hard as his own, if not quite. She would be tried as a traitor—and Espato was not kind to traitors. He wondered how she dared.

Impulsively he reached out a hand to her.

"You are very kind, senorita," he said, gratefully. "You should not risk so much for me—."

"Ah, but I am not risking as much as you think," she broke in quickly. "I should not have dared to come to you as I have today

only that Espato and his men are afield and the camp is almost deserted. I watched my chance when no one was looking and then with the help of Tony Gomez—" she paused and bit her lip as though she had said more than she had intended. She glanced at Phil anxiously, as though she hoped he had not heard.

But Phil had heard. He leaned toward her eagerly.

"Then it was Tony Gomez who opened the door for you tonight," he said, more as a statement than a question. "Then I was right in thinking the fellow wasn't altogether unfriendly?"

The girl bit her lip and turned away. When she turned back to him again Phil was surprised and chagrined to find that her eyes were filled with tears.

"Ah, if I have so much as harm' one hair of my Tony's head, I hope that I may die," she said tensely, then added, quite simply as though she had known him all her life, "Tony an' I, we love each other, senor. If anything should happen to him, I know that I would not live."

And suddenly Phil felt a warm affection for this simple little Mexican girl who confided her heart secrets to him with all the naivete of an innocent child, and yet who had

courage enough to risk her own safety by coming to help him, a stranger.

"You needn't be afraid that I'll do anything to harm Gomez," he said, gently. "An American never harms anyone who tries to do him a good turn."

"Ah, senor, I knew you were like that," said the girl, a smile banishing the tears in her eyes. "If I had not thought that you were good I should not have tried to help you."

"Listen," she added hurriedly. "I have not much longer to stay. Every minute I stay is dangerous both to you and to me. If Espato should find me here—.

"Listen, senor. I was among those on the outskirts of the fire the night they brought you here. I do not often stay to watch the treatment of prisoners, for it sickens me. But when I saw you, I was interested. You were so young an' you talk back to our great chief so fearless'. I was fill with admiration an' my heart boil' at the way Espato, he treat you.

"I say to myself, Juanita, if you can help that young Americano to escape, you must do so. He iss too young an' too courageous to die by the hand of Espato. An' so I will Americano, if I can but find the smallest chance.

"An' now, I mus' go. Perhaps I have al-

ready stay too long. Adios, Americano, an' be of good heart. Juanita is your frien' an' Tony Gomez, also. There will come a chance —Adios, senor."

And before he had time to speak, before he had even a chance to thank her the door opened by unseen means and Juanita Marino flitted out of his vision as swiftly and as silently as she had entered it.

CHAPTER XXVI

Prisoners and Loot

Phil never forgot those next few days of his imprisonment. Monotonously the hours dragged by while the prisoner paced the tiny cell, grinding his teeth in rage at his predicament.

If it had not been for the occasional visits of the friendly Mexican girl, Juanita, and the strong, though silent, sympathy of Tony Gomez, his imprisonment would have been altogether intolerable. But the thought that he had two good, though probably helpless, friends in the enemy camp, helped to buoy him up with the hope that, sooner or later, there might come the chance for his escape.

Tony Gomez was not so much Phil's friend—though in his heart was a sincere admiration for the Americano's courage—as he was Espato's enemy.

Phil, trying to draw the Mexican out, one day as to the cause of this enemy, finally drove Gomez to a pitch of excitement where he momentarily forgot caution.

"Why I hate this man, this dog, this devil," he cried, turning upon Phil, his lips pulled back from his strong, white teeth like a snarling animal, "You ask that, Americano? Then I, Antonio Gomez, son of the great Pedro Gomez, I will tell you why it is I hate. Listen, Americano."

He came closer to Phil, his strong hands clenched fiercely and Phil experienced something of the same thrill he would have felt if, when baiting a wild animal, he had succeeded in rousing it to the height of its jungle fury. For Antonio Gomez was roused.

"You ask me why I hate Espato," he repeated, his voice tense, "Then, thees is why. My father Pedro Gomez, one of the mos' great man ever live, he serve' under Espato for many year'. My father, he love the chase, he love get much rich loot, he love to feast and drink and make merry. My father, he great man, he love the life of the woods, the so great excitement. But my father he also have the great heart. He love not the torture."

Antonio paused and Phil saw that there were tears in his eyes. Were they tears of rage?

"He make the big talk with Espato, sometimes," the man continued, half turned from Phil, his hands still clenched fiercely. "He

tell him no murder, no torture prisoners. He say, take prisoners, yes, demand the ransom, yes—that is fair, that is just, my father say. But when the ransom come, then let go the prisoner. That, also is fair. So my father say."

"Do you mean to say," Phil demanded excitedly, "that Espato will not release the prisoner once he has received the ransom?"

Tony Gomez turned upon him a look full of scorn for his innocence.

"Sometime he do," he said, "and sometime he do not. When he have for the prisoner great hatred, when the prisoner have been so unfortunate as to have angered the so great Espato, then he keep the ransom and the prisoner, also."

Phil whistled his surprise. It was hard to believe that such despicable conduct was possible, even on the part of a Mexican bandit. Tony went on, speaking rapidly, as though he had not noticed the interruption.

"Ah yes," he was saying bitterly, "An' because my father did not agree with him Espato, he began to hate him secretly, planning to let him go on until he should be betrayed into doing something for which Espato could have his revenge."

Phil was listening, eagerly now.

"Yes?" he queried breathlessly as Gomez paused.

"My father was lieutenant to Espato then and all the band loved him. He had almost more power than Espato himself. Espato knew this and so he feared, while hating him. He dare' not kill my father without something—what you call?—a good excuse. There was danger that the men might turn upon him, Espato, himself.

"An' so he waited. An' while he wait he bait my father. He torture prisoners so vilely that my father would walk off into the woods striving to deafen himself to their cries of agony. Then Espato, he laugh an' scoff, calling my father a coward, a weak woman who can not stand an evening of fun."

Tony paused again but this time Phil made no comment. He was afraid that he might break the spell.

"An' so," Tony continued, quivering with emotion as he hurried to the climax of his story, "One night they brought in a prisoner, a mos' distinguish man an' even while Espato dispatch a messenger for ransom, he plan to torture this one.

"In vain did my father, the great Pedro, plead with him—the prisoner had done to my father a favor, once an' my father, the great Pedro, he never forget the one who do him a

favor. So my father, he plead with Espato. He ask that he be content with a so fat ransom an' spare the man's life.

"But Espato would not listen. He taunt, he insult my father until, in a rage, he fling off into the woods. I see him go, my father, the great Pedro and timidly I follow him. I am only twelve year old then but I remember all that happen' that night as though it had been burn' into my brain.

"I follow' my father for a long way before he notice' me. Then he turn an' smile' through his black wrath at me.

" 'Tony,' " he say, an' put his big han' so gentle on my head, 'Tony, it is not right that one man torture another. That way is not greatness won. Remember that, my son.'

"An' then," there was almost a sob in Tony's voice and Phil, greatly moved, leaned closer so that he might not miss a word, "My father, the great Pedro, he go back an' he watch his chance an' he try to rescue the prisoner, this one who was kind to him.

"Espato he caught him, my father, an' the prisoner also. He call' my father, the great Pedro, traitor, declare' that he too, then, should suffer the fate of the man he had try to save."

Tony's voice broke and he stood silent for

a moment. Phil realized now the meaning of the tears that had been in his eyes.

"They keel him, my father the great Pedro," cried Tony, turning upon him in a sort of fury. "They tie him to a tree beside the man he had try to help an' they torture him—torture him till his great heart break an' he die. You hear—he die, my father, the great Pedro, there in the shadow of the fire, without a moan to tell of his agony. An' I—I try to reach him an' they thrust me back with vile words. An' then I rush into the fores' an' I lie on my face an' I think I die too. I hope I die. I pray I die. I think no one can bear such pain an' live. My father what I love, the great Pedro. An' there they fin' me an' drag me back an' make me live..."

A deep silence, during which Phil's throat felt constricted and dry. He wanted to say something, felt the need of saying something, but didn't know what to say.

"Tony," he said, finally, his voice husky with sympathy. "He was a great man, Pedro, your father."

"Si, senor," said Tony quietly and without another word, picked up a tray from the table and went out.

For a long time after he was left alone Phil could think of nothing but Tony's tragic story. He forgot temporarily his own des-

perate plight in contemplation of the other's problem.

At the time, it seemed to him about the most important thing in the world that Tony should be given his revenge upon Espato.

But he was a fine one, thought Phil bitterly, as he began once more to pace up and down, up and down his cell, to help anyone get even with Espato!

Juanita had told him of the messenger who had been sent for his ransom and while the impudence of it had made him rage, as it had his chums, still it had given him some hope of release.

But Tony had given him to understand that Espato did not always release his prisoners, even upon receipt of a ransom, especially if Espato bore the prisoner a grudge. And surely Espato bore him a grudge and a half!

Things certainly looked bad for him, thought Phil, as he stared up at the little slit in the wall just above his head. If he could only get a message through to the fellows, if he only could. Soon it would be too late.

Juanita had told him that Espato seldom was away more than a week on a raid and several days had already passed. He might be back any time now—ready for his entertainment!

Phil stared up at that patch of blue sky

and once more his bound hands clenched in impotent fury. In imagination he was in the Arrow, flying through those fleecy white clouds, fleet as the birds themselves and just as free. Free——!

Again, as he had done so often in the nightmare of the last few days, he wondered what the boys were saying and doing, dear old Dick and Steve and Tom. He knew they must have been appalled by the demand for ransom and he wondered how they were meeting the problem.

Poor fellows, they sure were up against it. But then, no more so than he! he added grimly.

That very afternoon Espato and his roystering band came back. Phil knew that the raid had been successful by the noise they made. They had made a rich haul of loot and had brought in several prisoners. Since Tony had told his story, he hated these men more furiously than ever.

Just give him a gun and let him loose among them. He would die gladly for the privilege of "getting" a couple of them first.

But he wouldn't be given a gun, he thought, raging. He would be taken out and tied to a tree. He wondered how long Espato would be in getting around to his "entertainment."

CHAPTER XXVII

A Gleam of Hope

The bandits had spent the greater part of the night in wild revelry, and it was late the next morning before there was any noticeable stir of life about the camp.

Toward noon however there was an activity which indicated that there was something important on foot. Phil could hear the tread of many feet coming and going, and it was evident that most of the band had remained in camp for some purpose instead of going out on some foray. There was laughter and jesting and a general air of festivity prevalent, and Phil wondered what was in prospect.

It was not long before he found out. His door was flung open by a surly Mexican, who told him that he was to come with him into the presence of Espato.

"Is this the end, I wonder," Phil said to himself as he followed the man out into the open air. He had steeled himself to the thought of death, which he knew might come

to him at any moment. Was this the moment?

What he saw after his dazzled eyes had become accustomed to the brilliant sunlight was not calculated to reassure him.

Espato was seated on a rough box in the center of the clearing. About him in a semi-circle, some standing, others squatting on the ground, were his followers, all with an air of expectancy on their faces.

A group of four prisoners who had been brought in on the recent raid had been brought out and ranged before the bandit chief. Their hands were tied behind their backs but the bonds had been removed from their feet.

Two hundred feet from where Espato was sitting, the plateau terminated abruptly at the edge of a precipice. This ran down a sheer seven hundred feet with jagged rocks at its foot.

An evil sneering smile was on the face of the bandit leader as Phil was brought before him.

"So here is the Americano," he said and made a mocking bow. "It ees good of him to be present at our leetle merry-making. Perhaps he will even take part in it."

The significance of the last phrase was not lost on Phil, but his blue eyes had the cold-

ness of ice and the hardness of steel as he gazed unflinchingly at the man who had him so completely in his power.

The bandit glared back at him, but in the duel of eyes his own were the first to fall. He turned to one of his henchmen.

"Put him with the rest," he commanded.

Phil was pulled roughly away and stationed at one end of the line of prisoners.

Espato whispered to Arigo. The latter gave an order, and a squad of men selected one of the prisoners and ordered him to march toward the precipice.

The wretched man hung back, but was urged on by the pricking of knives and bayonets to the edge of the precipice. Phil shut his eyes. There was a piercing scream and a chorus of jeers and laughter from the crowd. When Phil opened his eyes the prisoner has disappeared, and the guards were marching back for another victim. And way off in the sky was a black spot that rapidly grew larger and was joined by others. They were vultures already gathering for the feast.

Again and again the terrible drama was enacted, until Phil was the only prisoner left standing. With each one massacred he himself felt the bitterness of death.

The vultures were no longer visible. They had swooped down to the rocks at the foot of

the cliff. Phil knew only too well what they were doing.

He thought that he knew why Espato had reserved him for the last. It was to spin out his agony, to multiply his sufferings many times. He found himself almost longing to have the thing over.

What was his surprise therefore to see Espato rise and signify by a wave of his hand that the horrid treat that he had given his bloodthirsty followers was over. The crowd dispersed, reluctantly, Phil thought, as though they were not yet sated, and this impression was confirmed by the many malignant looks cast at him as the throng gradually drifted away, leaving the solitary prisoner alone with Espato and his lieutenant.

The bandit chief sauntered down to where Phil was standing.

"Eet was a long time waiting for your time to come, eh Americano?" he said with a mocking grin. "But no. That would have been too e—eezy. When ze time come for you to die, eet must be hard and slow and long. Yes," he repeated, "hard and slow and long. Take him away, Arigo."

Phil followed the lieutenant, hardly able to believe that he had a reprieve. But what a reprieve and with what unimaginable horror at the end!

Still he was alive, while had he met the fate of the others, he would already have been food for the vultures. The hope that springs eternal still buoyed him up.

Almost exhausted by the terrific strain he had undergone, he was dragging himself over to the stone bench in his cell when he stumbled and would have fallen had he not reached out his hand against the wall and steadied himself. In the dim light he saw that he had knocked against a box that, with a number of other articles of loot, had been piled in his room during his absence.

He reached the bench and threw himself down on it. The tension under which he had been made him feel bruised and sore all over.

For a long time he lay there, resting and brooding over his plight. The entry of the man who brought his midday meal aroused him. He ate heartily and his spirits revived in some measure.

The box over which he had stumbled met his eye. He glanced at it indifferently, and then something familiar in it aroused his curiosity. Then suddenly with a great leap of his heart he realized what it was.

A radio set! Gathered in with the other loot by the ignorant bandits who had not the slightest idea of its use, but, struck by its

aggregation of wires and tubes, thought it might have some value and had brought it along with the rest.

With fingers that trembled with excitement, Phil went over the set and established that it was complete, batteries and all. The aerial had been cut away to permit of the set being removed as had the wire that constituted the ground connection, but with these exceptions it seemed to be in perfect shape, although the box bore evidence of rough and careless handling.

Hardly convinced that he was not dreaming, Phil buried his head in his hands and tried to think. He must have an aerial and a ground connection. But how could he get them?

Feverishly he went through the other bundles and packages that littered the room. All sorts of plunder gathered up hastily and indiscriminately were in them, and among them to his joy he found a coil of copper wire. A little later his fingers closed upon a metal disk about three inches in diameter. Here then were the materials for his aerial and ground connection.

But his first elation was followed by a sinking of the heart. Of what avail were these, he thought bitterly, to a prisoner. If

but for an hour, one little hour, he might have his freedom!

Then suddenly a thought struck him and brought new hope. There was Tony, the one man in the whole band who had not been brutal to him, the man who he felt sure hated Espato. Would he help him? Could he help him?

It was his only hope. If that failed him he was doomed.

He knew that Tony would soon come bringing his supper, as was his custom every night. In the meantime, he attached the wire to the metal plate which he intended to use as his ground, and also fastened one end of the coil of wire to the connection for the aerial. Then he waited, with his heart beating so fast that it seemed as though it would leap from his body.

At last the door opened and Tony came in with his supper. But Phil had no desire to eat just then. The moment the door was closed, he laid his plan before the Mexican in the broken combination of Spanish and English that was common on the border and enabled him to make himself easily understood.

Would Tony do one little thing for him? It was a very little thing. This metal disk that Phil held in his hand. He would throw

it out through the slit in the wall. Would Tony dig a little hole in the damp ground and bury it? A work only of one, two, or three minutes. Surely a little thing. And this long wire. Phil would put one end through the slit in the wall and when it was dark, if Tony would climb the big tree growing close to the wall and fasten the wire to the trunk of the tree high up. That would be a little harder, but still it would be only a little thing to do for a poor prisoner. Would he do this? Phil would reward him. God would reward him. Would he do it?

As he poured out his very soul in this entreaty, Phil studied Tony's face. There was sympathy there—yes, but also fear. The shadow of the dreaded Espato hovered over him. He shook his head.

"I dare not," he said. "Espato—he keel."

Again Phil renewed his pleading but apparently to no effect. Then he played his last card.

"Ask Juanita what you shall do," he urged. "Ask Juanita."

Tony nodded in assent.

"Maybe I come back," he said, and gathering up the dishes with the untasted food left the room.

An hour passed and then another, while Phil paced the narrow room like a caged

tiger. It was entirely dark when the door opened softly and Tony glided into the room.

"Juanita say yes," he whispered. "Tell me now what I do."

Phil gave him the most careful directions and Tony slipped out of the room. Perhaps half an hour had elapsed when he again opened the door.

"Eet is done," he whispered, and vanished like a shadow.

Two hours more Phil waited, until he was sure that the camp was sunk in slumber. Convinced of this, he turned on his batteries and saw the light spring into the filament.

Then Phil touched the key!

CHAPTER XXVIII

In Hot Haste

Dick and Tom were in Steve's quarters that night, a prey to the deepest restlessness and anxiety. The amount of the ransom had been collected, and they were awaiting the return of the messenger from Espato's band. He had promised to be back in a week for the money but was already a day overdue.

"What could have happened?" fumed Dick, as he paced restlessly about the room.

"All sorts of things," replied Steve gloomily. "It's possible that in a fit of drunken rage Espato may have killed Phil. Or again Phil may have tried to escape and have been brought down by a shot."

Tom winced at the very possibility.

"Even then, though," he suggested, "the Mexican might come for the money just the same in the hope that he'd get it anyway and then give us the double cross."

"If the scoundrel does, he's got the biggest surprise of his life coming to him," snapped Steve. "I don't know just what

plans Captain Bradley has for ensuring Phil's safe delivery in case the ransom is paid, but he's a wise bird and you can bet that no greaser will be able to put one over on him."

Just at that moment. the Captain himself stepped into the room and they stood at salute.

"Happened to be passing," remarked the Captain, "and stepped in on the chance that you may have heard something about that Mexican from Espato's camp."

"Not a thing," returned Dick. "We were just talking about that when you came in. We can't understand it and we're almost wild with anxiety about Phil."

"I don't mind admitting I'm worried myself," returned the captain. "Those Mexicans are slow and lazy, but not when such a large amount of money is concerned. Still, some accident may have happened to detain him and he may turn up at any time."

Just then there was a signal from the radio set and Steve turned to take the message. He listened a moment and then jumped as though he had been shot.

"It's Phil!" he shouted. "Phil's sending. Do you hear me, fellows? It's Phil!"

There was a wild yell from Dick and Tom as they rushed to his side, crazy with delight and scarcely able to believe their ears. Phil,

good old Phil, still alive and talking to them. Was it possible or was it only a dream?

Captain Bradley, scarcely less upset than themselves, had joined the excited group about the insturment. The message was coming in the code, and as they were all familiar with it they could read it from the clicks as it came along.

"Phil Strong sending," spelled out the message. "Prisoner in Espato's camp. Am hoping this will reach Captain Bradley's camp of Texas Rangers at Laguna. Need help and need it quick. Some prisoners killed today. I may be next. Espato planning to make my death slow and hard. No time to lose. Will stop now and wait for answer."

The clicks ceased, and the excited auditors looked at each other, delight that Phil was still alive and rage at his fiendish captor mingled on their faces.

"Answer him," cried Captain Bradley. "Don't wait a minute. Tell him we're coming to his help. Get from him whatever he knows that can guide us to the camp. Quick!"

Steve needed no urging, for before the captain had finished speaking his finger was busy with the key.

"We got you, Phil," he said. "Thank God you're still alive. Captain is here and Dick and Tom. They're wild to be after you. Keep

up heart. Tell us as nearly as you can where you are. Give us something to guide us."

They waited with thumping hearts and bated breath for the answer which came promptly.

"Thank Heaven you heard me, Steve," it clicked. "Here are the directions as far as I know them. I'm nearly a day's journey away. When I came to myself after being knocked on the head I saw that the greasers were taking me in a general south by southwest direction. The cave is on a plateau near the top of a mountain. There are two peaks, one of them like a church spire, the other with a rough likeness to a dog's head. It—"

"I know it," cried the captain. "It's the Monte de Cano. "I know just where it is. That's enough."

Then he checked himself, for the message was continuing:

"It's impossible to get there tonight, but you might make it tomorrow easily. Hope you recognize it. If you don't it's probably all up with me. Answer."

Scarcely had the clicking stopped then Steve, following the captain's directions, was sending.

"Captain Bradley talking," he radioed. "He knows the place. We start at once. Travel the rest of the night, lie low in the

day to avoid observation, reach you tomorrow night. Count on us. Be on your toes when the rush comes. Don't answer. We're off."

"Get ready, boys," said the captain. "We start in half an hour. Report at headquarters at the end of that time. See that your plane is in perfect condition, for there must be very careful reconnoitering on this trip."

He left the room hurriedly to give his orders.

Steve looked enviously at his two friends who were in a perfect frenzy of eagerness and anticipation.

"Some fellows have all the luck," he grumbled. "Here I am tied to this shack while you ginks are on your way for a fight with the greasers. It isn't a square deal."

"You're getting your share all right," replied Dick. "We wouldn't be going at all if it hadn't been for this old shack, as you call it, and the radio set that's in it. Then too, perhaps you'll have another message from Phil tomorrow. If you do, let us have it right away. We'll keep in touch with you by radio from the plane."

"You bet I'll stick to this old radio set like a long lost brother," replied Steve. "Probably though, Phil won't dare to radio in the daytime for fear of being observed, and on the other hand I won't dare to send to him for

fear the clicking of the signal may betray him. But if anything does come, I'll be right here."

As the boys were about to go out, the door was flung open without knocking, and into the room swaggered the insolent Mexican messenger of Espato's whom they had been expecting.

"Ah, senors," he said with a sweeping bow that had mockery in it, "Eet ees me, you see. A leetle late but still I come. Zee money. Ees eet ready?"

Behind his back the boys carefully closed the door.

Steve rose slowly to his feet.

"It has been hard to get," he said apologetically. "In fact, I'm afraid we can't give you so much."

As he spoke he edged imperceptibly nearer.

The beady eyes of the Mexican glittered like those of a rattlesnake.

"Zen ze Americano die," he exclaimed angrily, "and O, how he weel die!" he added, smacking his lips gloatingly.

Like a battering ram Steve's fist shot out and smashed the scoundrel straight between the eyes. The man went down to the floor with a crash. He struggled groggily to his feet and tried to draw a knife, but Dick

wrenched it from his hand, and in a moment they had him bound fast with a cavalry belt that Tom snatched from a nail on the wall.

"Now, you skunk," said Steve, "let me tell you something. You're not going to get ten thousand dollars and you're not going to get a cent. And what's more, we know where the prisoner is and we're starting out tonight to get him. And we're going to get Espato too and wipe that camp of yours off the map. Sabe?"

If looks could kill, Steve would have been blasted on the spot by the hate that shot from the malignant eyes of the prisoner.

"Now, fellows," Steve continued, "I know you'll have to be hurrying but just take a minute and run over to the captain's quarters and tell him we've got this reptile. He may be able to do something with him that will help you on this trip."

"All right," agreed Dick.

"And you're the fellow that was growling just now because you weren't going to be mixed up in this expedition," laughed Tom. "Seems to me you've had considerable fun already."

"Yes," grinned Steve. "It sure has helped some. It'll be a satisfaction as long as I live to think that I had a crack at this fellow. I've

been aching to ever since he was here a week ago."

The boys hurried over to the captain's quarters and told him of the capture of the messenger. He was highly pleased and sent Chips and another of the Rangers over to Steve's cabin to get the fellow, whom he decided to take along with him on the expedition. He might be forced into giving important information regarding the mountain pass that led to the camp.

At the end of the half hour everything was ready. The notes of a bugle rang through the camp. The airplane carrying Dick and Tom whizzed into the air and the Rangers leaped into their saddles.

CHAPTER XXIX

To the Rescue

When Phil had flung his radio message out into the night he knew that he had but a slender chance. Suppose static interfered and prevented the reception of his signals. Suppose Steve had been called away from his post. Suppose he were asleep. A score of suppositions forced their way into his tortured brain.

Still, it was a chance, and after he finished his first message he strove to get a grip on himself while he waited for a possible answer.

A click! There it was! And then a perfect delirium of delight swept through him as he spelled out the words:

"We got you, Phil. Thank God you're still alive!"

There they were, his tried friends and comrades, Dick and Tom and Steve, alert, excited, "wild to be after you." And the captain was there too, ready with his gallant Rangers to come to his help.

The reaction was so great from despair to hope that he almost lost control of himself. Then by a mighty effort he pulled himself together and continued the interchange of messages.

When these were finished he turned off the batteries and flung himself down and tried to sleep. But his brain was in a whirl and sleep was a long time in coming.

Radio! That blessed radio. The most wonderful thing in the world. Doc Denby had called it that one time, and Phil had rather felt inclined to smile at his enthusiasm. Now he was ready to agree with him.

He dropped off to sleep at last, a sleep filled with dreams, in which he seemed to hear the roar of the airplane and the thud of hoofs as the troop of Rangers rode to his rescue. But he heard screams too of tortured men driven over the precipice, he saw the ghoulish vultures tearing at their prey. And many times there rose before him the face of Espato with that livid scar on his forehead, his eyes gleaming with ferocity, his lips parted in a fiendish grin full of cruelty and menace.

It was late when he awoke from his feverish slumber and opened his eyes upon the day that was to be the most momentous

in his life. What did that day hold in store for him? Would it see him restored to friends and freedom? Or would it mark the vanishing of his last hope?

Even if the Rangers came, he was still environed by hideous peril. At the first warning of attack, Espato would probably kill him instantly. Everything depended upon an absolute surprise.

Marked by alternate hopes and fears the day wore on. To Phil it had never seemed so long. He craved the coming of the night as men athirst in the desert crave water.

Dusk came at last and deepened into darkness.

Phil was waiting, every nerve strained to the highest point of tension, when the door opened to admit one of the brigands, who ordered him to follow him into the presence of Espato.

For hours the bandit chief had been drinking heavily. Ever since he had been forced to drop his eyes before the cold defiant stare in the eyes of Phil, the incident had rankled in his mind like so much poison. He had been used to seeing only fright and pleading in the eyes of his helpless prisoners. Yet here was this young Americano, bound, utterly in his power, who had outfaced him—him, the great Espato—and

had made him lower his eyes. It was intolerable. Would he tamely endure such an affront and not wreak his rage on the beardless youth who had offered it? No! Per Madre de Dios, no!

The more he dwelt on it the more he worked himself into a hot fury, until he could restrain himself no longer and ordered the prisoner to be brought into his presence.

The more cautious Arigo, with his eye on the expected ransom, sought to appease his chief.

"Wait," he urged. "The messenger ought to be back tomorrow. If he has the money, well and good. Then you can work your will on the prisoner. But perhaps there will be conditions. It may be that we can do more with a live body than with a dead one. Revenge is sweet but money — ten thousand dollars in American money—ah, it is much."

"Fool," snarled the chief, "I shall not kill him—not yet. That would be too quick and easy. Tonight I shall play with him as the cat plays with the mouse. I shall make him want to die, but I will not let him die. I shall make him scream. I shall make him beg. I shall break his courage. I shall teach him that it is not good to stare into the eyes of Espato."

When Phil came before the bandit leader, he saw at once the drunken rage that looked through his reddened eyes, and drew from it the conclusion that at last his hour had come. But he braced himself to meet the ordeal, and there was no sign of blenching in the look he turned on his captor.

Once more Espato glared into Phil's eyes, and once more, after an interval, his own wavered before the indomitable light in the eyes of his captive.

"Take him to that tree," he ordered, his face congested and the veins standing out turgidly on his forehead, "and tie him fast. I do not want him to squirm too much when I get busy with him," he added, drawing his knife from his belt and testing its edge with his thumb.

Phil was dragged roughly away and tied to the tree indicated, which stood just at the edge of the zone of light cast by the fire about which the bandits were sprawled, drinking and waiting with keen zest for the next move of their chief.

The latter sat brooding, his brows drawn into a heavy scowl, enjoying his vengeance in anticipation and planning how he might inflict the most exquisite torture on the prisoner. There was no hurry, as he wanted

Phil to suffer the agony of suspense while he awaited the will of his captor.

Phil's hands had been drawn back by a rope that was fastened on the further side of the tree. His feet were fastened in similar fashion. The cords cut into him cruelly, but his physical pain was as nothing to his mental anguish.

If only one more day had intervened! Already the Rangers must be nearing the mountain stronghold. But hours might elapse before they got there and in those hours—

What was that? The wind soughing through the trees? No, there was not a breath of air stirring. Still that hum, that soft steady hum that persisted for a while and then died away into silence.

Phil's heart gave a tremendous leap. The airplane! That hum came from the motor of the Arrow. And the silence that had followed meant that the engine had been shut off and that Dick and Tom had made a landing. And if the airplane was there, the Rangers were there too, for Phil knew that they would keep pace with each other.

He glanced toward the chief and his followers. Had they heard anything? A moment and he was reassured. They were too absorbed in their drunken revelry to notice anything,

and as for Espato, he was too deep in his schemes of torture to think of anything else.

Perhaps half an hour dragged by while Phil listened intensely for any sound that might come from the surrounding forest. But not a rustle broke the silence.

At last the bandit chief arose and came toward his prisoner, knife in hand. Within a foot of him he paused, his eyes glowing with the baleful ferocity of a wild beast.

His followers had risen and stood at a respectful distance behind him, intent on the new and devilish entertainment which they felt sure was coming.

"Now," hissed Espato, as he fondled the haft of his knife caressingly, "listen to the screams of the Americano as I carve my name on his forehead in payment for the gash he dared to cut in mine. Six letters—E-S-P-A-T-O. It will take a long time to do the carving, for the letters will be wide and the cutting will be deep."

He raised his knife.

A rifle cracked and from the shattered wrist of the bandit chief the knife clattered to the ground.

Then came the shrill sound of a bugle, and out of the woods and into the clearing the Texas Rangers came charging in a wild rush that swept everything before them!

CHAPTER XXX

Rounding up "Muggs" Murray

In an instant the camp was in pandemonium. Revolvers cracked and bullets whizzed and bandits and Rangers were at death grips. The Mexicans grasped their arms, and under the threats and curses of Espato tried to rally. They were fully equal in number to the Rangers, but far inferior in stamina and courage, and were steadily driven back to the edge of the plateau.

Dick and Tom were in the van of the charge, and after the first volley they rushed to the tree where Phil was bound. A slash of their knives cut the ropes, and then they threw their arms about their comrade and fairly hugged him in the exuberance of their delight.

Phil was quite as incoherent in his rapture as they, but the fight was on and all were eager to join in the fray.

"Rub my arms and legs, fellows, and get the blood into them," cried Phil, "and then give me a gun. I've got a score to settle with Espato."

They set to work, and in a minute or two Phil was ready for action. They gave him a Colt's, and all three ran in the direction of the melee.

But by this time the fight was nearly over. Many of the Mexicans had fallen, and others as they neared the edge of the frightful precipice had thrown down their arms and surrendered.

Espato himself was on the very edge of the cliff engaged in a desperate knife contest with an antagonist. As the boys rushed toward him, Phil gave a gasp of surprise as he saw that that antagonist was Tony.

At the same moment Tony's knife found its mark and was buried to the haft in Espato's breast.

With a wild scream the scoundrel toppled over the cliff. Shriek followed shriek as he whirled over in that appalling flight. Then came a crash and—silence.

Tony wiped his knife on his shirt and thrust it back in its sheath.

"For my father," he muttered, as he walked back toward the Rangers with his hands uplifted in token of surrender.

A few more scattering shots and the fight was ended. The surviving members of the band were disarmed and placed in the center of the camp under guard. Sev-

eral of the Rangers had been wounded but not seriously, for the Mexicans, indifferent marksmen at the best, had shot even more wildly than usual owing to the completeness of the surprise.

After everything had been attended to, Captain Bradley had time to congratulate Phil and to receive the warm thanks of the latter for having come to his help in his sore extremity.

"That's all right," smiled the captain. "I'm only glad that we got here in time. You surely had a close call. It was the radio that saved you."

"Radio and you combined," replied Phil, "and it proved a strong combination. I want to ask one more favor of you Captain," he continued, "and that is to let two of your prisoners go."

He pointed toward Tony and Juanita, the latter of whom was sitting in a group of the women, her dark eyes filled with fright.

He briefly related how he owed his life to them and the Captain nodded sympathetically.

"Of course, I'll let them go," he answered. "As a matter of fact," he continued, "I don't see how I'm going to take any prisoners back with me. You see this whole thing

is rather irregular"—he smiled whimsically—"as we technically have no right to invade Mexican territory, even though we're doing a service to civilization in wiping out this den of rattlesnakes. It might stir up a row at Washington, even though Washington at heart might be glad we did it. We Texans don't care much for red tape ourselves, but there's no use in embarrassing the Government. Espato and his lieutenant are dead, and the rest of these rascals can drift away wherever they will. But I'll give this Tony and Juanita, as you call them, a pair of horses and let them get a head start for fear some of these fellows may have it in for Tony because he killed Espato. The rest I'll keep till tomorrow and then turn them loose."

He was as good as his word and in a little while Tony and Juanita were started off, with fervent thanks from Phil and as much money in their pockets to start housekeeping with as the boys could scrape up between them.

The next morning the rest of the prisoners were released, after they had been given a stern warning by Captain Bradley that their lives wouldn't be worth a moment's purchase if they were ever again found on the other side of the Mexican border. Then the troop took up its march to Laguna, while

Phil, Dick and Tom hovered over them with the plane.

The Radio Boys were in the highest spirits, and Phil was kept busy telling his companions all the details of his capture and imprisonment.

"It made me sore," he said, "to have them nab me before I could get back to camp and give you the tip on the 'Muggs' Murray gang. We could have caught them dead to rights and rounded them up without any trouble."

"That's queer," muttered Dick, who at the time was scanning the landscape with his glasses.

"What's queer?" asked Phil and Tom in the same breath.

"That auto," replied Dick, passing the glasses over to Phil. "You don't see many of them in this forsaken country. And whoever's at the wheel is driving like mad."

"Coming as if the old boy were after them," agreed Phil, focusing the glasses upon the machine. "From the direction of the border too. By the great horn spoon!" he shouted suddenly. "Do you know who's in it? Muggs Murray and Rocks Gurney or I'm a Chinaman."

"Go way," exclaimed Tom unbelievingly.

"Sure as shooting," persisted Phil. "The

States must have got too hot for them and they're making tracks into Mexico where they can't be followed. Now's our chance."

With a great swoop he brought the plane to the ground and hurried up to Captain Bradley with the news. From the ground the car had not come into sight and was still several miles away.

A little way off was a clump of woodland through which ran the road along which the car was coming. A few sharp orders, and the troop of Rangers was deployed to the best advantage in the wood where they lay flat on the ground sheltered by the trees. To the casual eye there was no sign of life visible.

Soon the purring of the car was heard and before long the machine came dashing along at a high rate of speed. It stopped abruptly, however, at the sight of several huge rocks that had been rolled into the road by the Rangers.

With a muttered oath, the men who were in the car climbed out to remove the obstacles. And just then a volley of shots was fired into the air, and up about the fugitives rose, as if by magic, a swarm of men with leveled rifles.

There was a startled shout from the two rascals. Gurney—for Phil had guessed cor-

rectly—turned fairly green from fright and held up his hands promptly. But Murray was made of more desperate stuff and quick as lightning made a move to draw his weapon. Before he could get it, however, a half a dozen brawny hands had grasped him, and although he fought like a tiger he was soon overpowered, bound and thrown to the ground, where he lay still struggling to burst his bonds and hurling imprecations at his captors.

"The jig's up, Murray," said Phil, who had been foremost of those who had thrown themselves upon him. "Where's that money you stole from the Castleton bank? Come across now."

His only answer was an oath.

"We'll search the car," said Captain Bradley. "No doubt he's brought his loot with him."

Phil and Dick were delighted to do the searching, and in a moment there was a cry of delight from the latter, as he lifted up the rear seat of the car and discovered piles of bills bound together with strips that bore the initials of the cashier of the Castleton bank.

The money was counted by Captain Bradley while the Radio Boys looked on with feverish impatience.

"Thirty-eight thousand, five hundred and fifty dollars," he announced at last. "That accounts for most of the forty thousand you say he stole. The rest I suppose he's spent."

"Thirty-eight thousand odd!" cried Dick in uncontrollable delight.

"Maybe we won't have some good news to radio to Castleton tonight," exclaimed Phil, equally as elated.

"Glory hallelujah!" shouted Tom, as he clapped his comrades on the back.

Murray and Gurney were hustled into the car under guard, one of the Rangers was placed at the wheel, the Radio Boys clambered into the Arrow and the column took up its line of march.

If ever a plane carried light hearts, the Arrow did that afternoon. The boys laughed, jested and chaffed each other and tasted to the full the sheer delight of living.

"Well," sighed Phil blissfully, "if we were looking for adventure when we came here we sure have got our fill of it. We'll never have such exciting times again as long as we live."

But Phil was mistaken, as will be seen by those who read the following book of this series, entitled: "Radio Boys Under the Sea, or, the Hunt For the Sunken Treasure."

Steve's delight when he welcomed Phil on the arrival of the Rangers at Laguna that afternoon was beyond expression. He instantly radioed to Castleton the story of the recovery of the bank's money, and the answer he received bore full testimony to the excitement and gratification caused by the news. "Muggs" Murray and Gurney were thrown into jail, there to await extradition and trial for their crimes.

That evening they all foregathered in Steve's cabin, where once again Phil had to go over the story of his adventures while he was in Espato's hands.

They sat till late, and then there came a moment of silence while each was busied with his own thoughts.

Phil was gazing with rapt interest at Steve's radio set.

"Hope you'll know it when you see it again," chaffed Steve. "What's the matter? Fallen in love with it?"

"Why shouldn't I?" answered Phil. "Radio saved my life!"

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